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A FAMILY SECRET.

A NOVEL.

By "ELZEY HAY."
(FANNY ANDREWS.)

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PREFACE.

A PREFACE is almost a work of supererogation, since few people ever stop to look at it; though it would be but fair, before passing judgment on an author, to see what he may have to say for himself.

It is unfair, for instance, to find fault with a book for not fulfilling purposes which it was never designed to fulfill; and by way of disarming such criticism, it may as well be stated, in the outset, that the present volume is very simple and unpretending in its aims, being written solely to amuse. It is not a sugar-coated pill to doctor public morals; it does not pretend to convey instruction on any subject, nor does it aspire, as a work of art, to portray grand and lofty passions; but if it shall help to while away one weary hour, if it shall beguile one heavy heart into momentary forgetfulness of its burden, the writer will feel that it has not been given to the world in vain.

One caution it may be best, perhaps, not to omit here. Some sensitive critics may imagine that the character of Æneas Tadpole is intended as a satire upon the ministers of religion. Far be such a thought from the heart of this writer. The character named is merely designed as a portrayal of ineffable meanness, and hypocrisy, as the basest of meanness, is made his predominant trait.

And now, the author having pleaded its cause, the work must stand its trial at the bar of public opinion, the highest tribunal to whose judgment a writer can appeal. Trusting the verdict may be a favorable one, the author commits the work to its fate.

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A FAMILY SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. BOTTOMS'S HOTEL.

"FOUR hours more! This is the deuce of a business, waiting half the morning at a confounded little country station without even a cigar to help a fellow pass the time!" And the speaker turned, with a gesture of impatience, from the window of the car, through which he had been conversing with some one outside. He was a strikingly handsome young man, dressed in the uniform of a lieutenant in the United States army, and apparently just entering upon his third decade of life. He sat still for a few moments, with his hands in his pockets, looking intensely out of humor, then rose as if to leave the car, but paused before turning towards the door, while an amused smile crept over his features as he surveyed the scene around him.

It was not a very inviting one. "Pullman sleepers" were unknown in those days, and the early dawn of a sultry August morning glared hot and red upon the tired passengers, tumbled about in confused heaps on the hard, comfortless benches. The picture was as grotesque as it was cheerless. The train had not been in motion for more than an hour, and most of the passengers were beginning to rouse themselves and inquire peevishly into the cause of the delay, though some favored few, possessed of an admirable talent for sleeping under difficulties, were still snoring away in blissful unconsciousness of wry necks and twisted spines. One very pretty young lady was crushing her bonnet against the side of the car with stolid insensibility, and a skittish old widower just in front, who had lost his wig, slumbered on as tranquilly as if his bald scalp had not been shining full in the face of unconscious beauty. Further on a rural member of the Legislature, who had taken off his shoes and hung his stockinged feet out at the window for the edification of the traveling public, was still serenely sleeping, with his head dangling over the wooden arm of the seat into the passway, while the red morning sun streamed full upon his face, and the flies whisked around his wide-open mouth at pleasure. Most of the travelers, however, as we have said, were beginning to indulge in those preliminary yawnings and stretchings that betoken a general waking up, and our hero's impatient exclamation, though not meant to be heard inside the car, was received there with a growl of assent, chiming in, as it did so exactly, with the state of public feeling.

"What's this confounded delay about, anyhow?" inquired a stout old gentleman over the way, shaking himself up into a sitting posture, and popping his red face out at the window.

"A freight-train just ahead of us smashed up last night," answered our hero, who had been making inquiries of the people outside; "and they say it will be impossible to get the track clear for twenty-four hours, so there is nothing for it but to wait till the down-train comes in at ten o'clock, then change cars and let it turn back westward with us."

"Ten o'clock, the devil! What time is it now?"

"Just a quarter to six. Halloo, my man," continued the young officer, addressing one of the train-hands who entered just then with a can of water, "what are our chances for breakfast this morning? I'm as empty as a charity-box!"

The man laughed, and cast a significant glance through the window towards the barren red hills, washed into yawning gullies, and interspersed with groves of scrubby pine that stretched in every direction far as the eye could reach.

"Blackberries is gone," he said, with

a jocose smile, as he withdrew his eyes from this silent survey of the unpromising landscape and fixed them upon the face of his interlocutor, "but if you wouldn't mind walking a mile or so," he added, "up to Mill Creek Junction, I reckon you can git a bit of something worth having at Mrs. Bottoms's hotel. 'Taint the reg'lar breakfast house, Mill Creek ain't, but she's a tip-top 'un, Mrs. Bottoms is, and can cook a meal's vittles as good as any queen."

With this doubtful eulogy upon Mrs. Bottoms's *cuisine*, the man discharged a prodigious squirt of tobacco-juice by way of emphasis, and went about his business.

The lieutenant yawned, muttered something to himself in a tone of discontent, then put on his hat and started out, but was detained as he passed the seat just back of his own by something pulling at his sleeve, and a soft, childish voice saying,—

"Will you move this, please? My dress is caught, and Father Perline has gone to sleep."

The young officer looked round and beheld a pretty little girl, some twelve or thirteen years old, tugging away with all her might at his valise, which had somehow slipped from its place and got wedged under the bench on which the child was sitting, drawing a fold of her dress along with it and pinning her down so fast that she could hardly move her lower limbs. By her side was reclining an elderly gentleman with a singularly attractive countenance, who might have been taken for her father but that he wore the garb of a Romish priest. His head was resting against the paneling of the car, and he seemed to have just fallen into a light slumber, from which the child was too considerate to wake him. There was a quaint blending of womanly thoughtfulness and childish simplicity about her that amused the young man, and he became so absorbed in contemplating the sweet, upturned face that he forgot all about the child's request until she again called his attention to it.

"Please, will you take away your valise?" she repeated, in a less patient tone. "I can't move my foot with it there."

Ashamed of his negligence, the young man darted at the offending article and drew it forth with such alacrity that he brought a piece of the child's dress along with it.

"There, now, what an awkward vagabond I am!" he said, eying the rent ruefully. "I deserve that you should be very angry with me."

"Oh, no, that is nothing," cried the little girl, good-humoredly. "Sister Veronica is not here to inspect, and I will pin it up so that nobody can see. Besides," she added, with a twinkle in her eye that betrayed her a veritable daughter of Eve in spite of her staid, nun-like habit, "I am to have new things, and am to leave off the ugly dress they wear at St. Catherine's when we get to New Orleans."

"To New Orleans!" cried the young officer, in astonishment; "you are surely not going there?"

"Why not?" asked the child, wondering at his surprise.

"Why, the yellow fever! There never was such an epidemic known as is raging there now, and people have fled by thousands in every direction till the city is almost depopulated."

"That is just the reason why Father Perline is going," said the child, quietly; "because everybody else is running away, and there are none left to take care of the sick."

"But you are too little to take care of the sick; why does Father Perline carry you with him?"

"To put me to school in the convent of St. Sacrament, where they go to learn music; and, besides, I am not so little as you think me," she added, drawing herself up with an air of offended dignity. "In three years and a half I shall be sixteen, and that is almost as old as Victorine Lamont, the oldest of all the old, old girls that used to sit in Sister Lucretia's room at St. Catherine's and do exercises in geometry. I wonder if people often live to be as old as Victorine, and Father Perline, and St. Joseph?"

The young officer laughed.

"Not if they are put to school in plague-stricken cities," he said, in an undertone; then, raising his voice, he asked, "Are you not afraid of the fever, little one?"

"No," was the prompt reply; "that is," added the child, after a moment's consideration, "I am not so much afraid of it as of Mr. Tadpole and that naughty boy Æneas, for my father said if I did not go to New Orleans with Father Perline I should be sent back to Mr. Tadpole's school."

"Her father!" muttered the young man to himself. "Great God! what murderous fanatics these Catholics are!"

"But this child's father is not a Catholic," said a low, gentle voice, close to the

lieutenant's ear; and glancing round, he saw the priest, who had been roused by their conversation, regarding him with a look of mild reproach. The young man colored.

"I beg your pardon, reverend father," he began; "I am sorry if I have been surprised into committing a rudeness, but I could not help feeling shocked when I found you were taking this little one," fixing his eyes again upon the child, who was now busy pinning up the rent in her dress, and seemed wholly unconscious that she was a subject of interest or remark to any one, "into the very jaws of death. You have a right to dispose of your own life as you please, and I honor the greatness of soul that——"

"No, no, young man, none of us has a right to his own life," replied the priest, interrupting him; "it belongs to God alone, and I cheerfully dispose of mine as he, through his Holy Church, may direct. In his name the Holy Mother sends me forth to minister to her dying children in my native city, and I have no right, even if I had a wish, to reject the mission."

"But, father," persisted our hero, who was at an age when men feel much less diffident about taking their seniors to task than they become a few years later, and whose generous heart, moreover, prompted him to espouse, with all the ardor and indiscretion of youth, the cause of helpless innocence, "do God and your church command you wantonly to sacrifice the life of an innocent child?"

"God commands us," answered the priest, after a short pause, "to care for the soul rather than the body. I would gladly have cherished both if I could, and left my precious little charge in the holy and safe retreat where I found her, till she could follow me without danger; but her father directed otherwise, and the laws of the land place his authority above mine,—above even that of the Holy Church."

"What an unfeeling monster her father must be!" exclaimed the lieutenant, indignantly.

"*Quoniam pater meus et mater mea derelinquerunt me, Dominus autem assumpsit me*," said the priest, laying his hand caressingly on the child's head. "And those for whom the world has no place the Holy Church receives into her bosom."

A horrible suspicion crossed the young man's mind as the priest uttered these words. He turned and looked hard at the speaker, who met his eyes with a frank, open gaze, which at once convinced him that whatever wrong might be meditated against the child by others, the worthy ecclesiastic had no hand in it. The good father seemed to divine what was passing in the young man's breast, and he proceeded, as if answering the thought.

"The father of this child is a stranger to me; I have seen him but once, and he confided nothing to me as to his intentions regarding her, but merely stated the alternatives between which I was forced to choose,—either to take her with me at once, or send her back to a place where, if all I have heard be true, she would run quite as great risks from neglect and ill treatment as she will in New Orleans from yellow fever; at all events, her own choice is to go with me. Ruth," he continued, appealing to the child, "which would you rather do: go to New Orleans with Father Perline, and die of the fever, or be sent back to Mr. Tadpole?"

The child answered by throwing her arms round the good man's neck and clinging passionately to him. Affection for Father Perline, and dread of Mr. Tadpole, were evidently the fundamental dogmas of poor little Ruth's orthodoxy.

The passengers were all wide awake by this time, and our young friend felt that it would be out of place to continue longer a remonstrance which, if he had been a few years older, he would have considered it impertinent to begin at all. He therefore dropped the subject, and invited his new acquaintances to join him in his walk to the Junction, and share his chances for getting breakfast. The priest declined for himself, but gratefully accepted the offer for Ruth, promising that he would join them in an hour or so, and relieve the lieutenant of his charge.

The little girl gave herself up to the care of her new protector with a confidence and self-possession which showed that she was quite used to the guardianship of strangers. As she descended from the car with a light bound, scarcely touching the hand held out for her support, a little traveling-satchel she carried on her arm flew open, and a small volume, elegantly bound, dropped upon the ground. The lieutenant picked it up.

"Let me see what you have been reading," he said, turning over the leaves. "Ah, it is all in French; so you are a French scholar, *ma petite?*"

"Yes; everybody spoke French at St. Catherine's."

"A book of devotions, too," he continued, casting his eyes over the pages; "that looks very pious. Are you going to be a nun?"

"Oh, no, I am going to be a famous opera-singer," was the naïve rejoinder.

"An opera-singer! What does Father Perline say to that?"

"He says I am too young to decide yet, but when I am grown, if I will be very good, it may be that I can do my duty better by being a great and famous person than by becoming a nun. My father says I must be a nun, but I won't."

The words were spoken with an air of decision that indicated a very determined character, and at the mention of her father the child's face assumed a bitterness of expression painful to behold in one of her years. The young officer wondered if a dim shadow of the suspicion that haunted him had ever crossed her youthful mind.

As he continued idly fingering the little volume in his hand, he chanced to turn over a fly-leaf at the beginning, on which was inscribed, in a precise female calligraphy, the child's full name,

"RUTH HARFLEUR,"

with other words, to the effect that the little book had been presented as a reward of merit by the Mother Superior of St. Catherine's Convent, Quebec, Canada.

"So that is your name, is it?" said the lieutenant, reading the inscription aloud. "Ruth Harfleur,—and a very pretty name it is,—French too." And in this fact he seemed to perceive some possible explanation of the unnatural parent's desire to have her reared in French convent schools; but why New Orleans, rather than Quebec, just at this season?

The child herself was perplexed with none of these questions. She liked her new companion, and was gratified to hear him praise anything belonging to her.

"Do you really like my name?" she asked, looking up at him with a bright smile. "I wonder if I should like yours too: is it a very pretty one?"

"I don't know whether you would think so," he replied, "but it is a name that all who bear it are very proud of. I will put it down here by yours, so that you can judge for yourself, and then, maybe, you will look at it sometimes, and think of me, when I am far away." With that, he wrote something in pencil just below Mother Isodora's prim inscription, and returned the volume to Ruth, who read aloud,

"AUDLEY MALVERN,
"Heathmoor,
"Virginia."

"Why, it sounds just as if it had come out of a novel!" cried the child, in a delighted voice. "I like it a great deal better than my name."

"You do? I must bear that in mind," said Malvern, smiling, "for who knows but I may some day propose to you to make the exchange? I've a propensity for falling in love with opera-singers, and you will make an uncommonly pretty one, Ruth. When I get to be a colonel, and you are a grown-up young lady, I mean to come back and ask you to marry me. Will you have me, Ruth?"

"I would if you were not a heretic," was the innocent reply.

"Oh, as for that matter," said Malvern, laughing, "it is true my family are all heretics, but I don't think I have religion enough of any sort to be made a serious objection against me."

Audley Malvern had just reached that age at which we feel disposed to be very patronizing towards people a few years younger than ourselves. At twenty-one he fancied himself quite a patriarch, in comparison with a girl of thirteen, and Ruth's convent training had caused her to retain so much of the freshness and simplicity of childhood, that she seemed to him almost a baby still. They were walking along on the railroad track, Audley keeping in the centre, and holding Ruth by the hand to support her while she amused herself by tripping along on the iron bars. They had gone about three-quarters of a mile from the place where they left the train, when they came to a low, moist spot, with a foot-path running through it parallel to the railroad. They descended into this path, where it was much more agreeable walking than on the dusty track beside it. They had not proceeded far, when Ruth suddenly released her companion's hand, and darted forward, with an exclamation of delight, to pluck a solitary flower blooming by the wayside.

"See, see here!" she cried, triumphantly, displaying her treasure. "It is just like the wild lilies I used to gather at home, when mammy took me walking on Sunday afternoons."

"Your mammy?" cried Audley, catching at the word. "I didn't know you

little Canadian children had mammies; I thought you called them *bonnes*."

"Canadian! I'm no Canadian," answered Ruth, with the air of one resenting an injury. "I'm a Southerner: I was born in Georgia."

"Indeed!" and the young officer regarded her with a look of fresh surprise.

"Yes; but I don't know that I have any right to call it home now, for I have not been there in a long, long time,—not since I was a child."

"And how long ago is that?" asked Audley, with a smile.

"Five years," she answered, in a tone of childish pathos. "I was just eight years old when mamma died, and then father carried me away to Mr. Tadpole's school, and I have never been home since. I cried very much when they sent me away. I was a child then, you know, and Uncle Bruen said there was no need to hurry about my education; he thought I might wait a year or two at home, but father wouldn't hear to it. I have always loved Uncle Bruen for that. He was very good to me when I was little, but I dare say he has forgotten me now, or maybe he is dead, for I have never heard from him since I left home, though I wrote him three letters without a blot, or a word spelt wrong in any one of them. Aunt Bruen sent me a Christmas-box once, but Mrs. Tadpole took it from me, because, she said, sweet things were not good for children. She used to give us cold bread and hominy with molasses for supper, and horrid old peach-pies for a treat on Saturdays. I hate pies, and I'm sure they can't be good for children, because Annie Barrow's mother had to take her home to keep her from dying of dis—pep—peps—some dreadful disease with a long name, that Dr. Sharpe said came from eating the wrong things."

"And you would have gone home too, I suppose, if they had let you?" said Malvern, amused at the child's narrative.

"That I would!" cried Ruth, vehemently. "It was a dreadful place, and Mr. Tadpole was worse even than his wife. He used to make us spend the whole of Sunday listening to sermons. We had to go to church twice a day, and at night he would read aloud out of horrid good books, and we were punished if we went to sleep."

"You don't seem to like sermons and good books," said the young man, smiling.

"No, indeed; and the prayers were worse than the sermons. Whenever any of us did anything wrong, Old Slimy —we called him that, you know, because tadpoles are slimy—would put it down in his note-book, and pray for us by name the next Sunday at church. It's dreadful to be prayed for: everybody turns round and looks at you; and then I used to think Mr. Tadpole's prayers were granted, too, because things were always happening to me there."

"Were you punished often?" asked Audley.

"Oh, yes; we had to get lessons in the Catechism that long," measuring an imaginary column with her fingers, "and to learn whole chapters in the Bible by heart. I used to be punished oftener than the other girls, because Æneas Tadpole was always doing things to make me angry. He was a big boy, two years older than I, and used to take my books from me, and rub out my sums after I had done them on my slate, and when I cried about it he would call me names. I didn't mind that so much, but sometimes he would call my poor dead mamma names, and then I would say things, and he would run and tell his father tales; then old Mr. Tadpole would come and lecture me, and tell me I was a child of Belial, and there was no place in heaven for the like of me; and then he would make prayers about me next morning before the whole school, and tell God how bad I was. One day Æneas made faces at me while his father was praying, and I flung my Bible at his head, and, oh, such a storm as there was then!"

"What did they do to you?" Audley inquired, highly amused.

"Oh, all sorts of things. I was kept a week on bread and water,—that was a favorite punishment with Mrs. Tadpole; because she saved by it,—and then I was prayed over, every Sunday, for a long time, and had to learn a whole chapter in the Bible by heart every day. Did you ever read the Bible? It's a dreadful book."

"N—o, I can't say that I've ever read it enough to do me any harm," said Malvern, with an honest blush at his own delinquency.

"So, then, you didn't go to a New England school when you were little!" cried the child, reassured by this creditable confession. "They made me learn all Chronicles by heart at Bethel Seminary, and I was beginning on Deuteronomy when I went to St. Catherine's."

"And how came you to go there?"

"I got sick, with a dreadful cough, that used to keep me awake all night; and the doctors said that unless I went to a milder climate I couldn't live long. Then father came, and I thought I was going home, but he carried me to Canada instead."

"So this is not the first attempt they have made to get rid of you, little one," thought Audley Malvern to himself, eying the child with increasing interest as she continued her simple narrative.

"It was warmer there, sure enough," she said; "not out-of-doors, you know, but the Sisters kept me in a nice warm room, and nursed me so kindly, that I began to get well before I had been in the convent three weeks. They did everything the doctor said, and gave me nice things to eat, and were just as good to me as if I had had a mamma to care about it, like Annie Barrow. I was not put under discipline with the other girls, as father directed, because Sister Clelia said it was too severe, and would cause my death; and I never had to hear sermons or read the Bible at all. Sister Clelia said it was not a proper book for little girls, and gave me the 'Lives of the Saints' instead, which I liked a great deal better, for it was full of beautiful stories, like the fairy-books Annie Barrow used to keep hid in the big garret at Bethel."

"What a confounded farce people make of religion!" said our hero to himself, with a sneer; then he remarked aloud, "And Father Perline found you at St. Catherine's, I suppose?"

"Yes; he was confessor to the nuns. I cried and felt very miserable when they told me I was to see a priest, because I thought he was coming to spy me out, and tell God tales on me like Mr. Tadpole; but as soon as I saw him he looked so different from the people I used to see at Bethel, that I didn't feel afraid of him at all. And then he spoke kindly to me and took me on his knee, and when he found I had no mother he told me the blessed angels took all motherless children under their protection, and that my own dear mamma was a glorified saint in heaven, and that she would watch over and protect me. Before that I had always been afraid to think of my poor mamma at all, because it seemed as if she was in some dark, dreadful place; but now I saw that all Mr. Tadpole had been telling me was nothing but a wicked falsehood, and after that I never felt lonely and desolate, nor wished I was dead any more."

Audley's heart was touched by the child's artless narrative, in spite of the religious prejudices with which it was crammed. He took her hand in his own, and asked, kindly,—

"Do you remember much about your mother, my little Ruth?"

"Yes; I remember that she was very beautiful and good, and loved me, oh, so much! Nobody has ever cared for me since she died except Father Perline. She seemed to be always sorry about something, and used to cry over me sometimes, when no one was by, and tell me I was like my father; but I don't see," she added, with a slight shudder, "how that could be, because father looks so terrible, you know."

"Then I'm sure it can't be," said Malvern, smiling, "for you look anything but terrible."

The conversation was interrupted at this point by their arrival at Mill Creek Junction. The aspect of the place was by no means inviting. The long line of railroad over which they had just traveled was met here by a branch from the South, and in the angle of the great Y, formed by their union, stood a dingy little wooden depot, with a broad platform all around it, upon which the sunbeams poured with blinding brightness. A knot of idle rustics was gathered at one corner of the building screening themselves under its projecting eaves, and spitting tobacco in lugubrious silence, while awaiting the arrival of the train. Some lazy mules and a sleepy nag or two were tied up in a thicket of small pines near by, that served as hostelry to the neighborhood, while opposite the depot, flanked on either side by rows of dirty little shops, and unsheltered by a single tree, rose one of those characteristic edifices whose unpromising exterior but dimly foreshadows the inner horrors of an American country tavern. A tall post stood before the door supporting a very small sign-board, on which some ambitious artist had undertaken to paint the word ENTERTAINMENT in gorgeous capitals of blue and gold; but not calculating correctly the space at his command, he found, when he had blazoned the first two syllables, that no room remained for the rest of the word, so there was nothing for it but to turn over and finish on the other side. As Ruth and Audley happened to come up on the *tainment* side of the board, they might have been somewhat perplexed as to the meaning of this singular announcement if a burly negro

fellow had not, just at that moment, appeared at the front door with a sonorous bell in his hand; at the first tinkle whereof various idlers that hung about the doors of the shops near by broke and made for Mrs. Bottoms's premises, with an alacrity that vividly suggested Aby Butler's derivation of the word "breakfast."

Audley Malvern and his little companion were ushered by the negro bell-ringer into a long, low, dingy room, whose fly-specked walls were pervaded with a lingering odor of collards and fried bacon. At the head of a long table, more bountifully than artistically spread, sat a squashy middle-aged woman in a soiled cap, whose appearance at once proclaimed her, without further introduction, the landlady of Mrs. Bottoms's hotel. Just behind her chair, and close enough to have his ears pinched whenever he began to nod, which happened so often as to keep Mrs. Bottoms's fingers in constant practice, stood a little black urchin, pulling a string attached to a succession of dirty paper flaps suspended from the ceiling directly over the table, and intended, by their motion, to brush away the flies. But the flies of Mrs. Bottoms's household were not to be scared by trifles. They were very sociable flies, and would buzz about your ears, roost on your nose, take liberties with your bread and butter, and get into your coffee regardless alike of Mrs. Bottoms's fly-brushes and your own private exertions. Everything in Mrs. Bottoms's dining-room was fly-specked; the windows were opaque with the deposits of ages; the table-cloth, the plates, cups, the bread and butter, Mrs. Bottoms herself was fly-specked, and from the general appearance of things one would have said that Mill Creek Junction lay under the curse of a perpetual Egyptian plague.

The two new guests presented a very different appearance from the usual frequenters of Mrs. Bottoms's establishment, and were immediately conducted by their sable guide, with the keen aristocratic instincts of his race, to the post of honor at Mrs. Bottoms's right hand. That lady evidently appreciated her viceroy's discrimination, and bestowed her attention at once upon the strangers. After a cup of washy coffee had been served to each, Mrs. Bottoms inquired of Ruth whether she would choose "biled vittles" or "fried vittles" for her breakfast. The child's look of hopeless perplexity brought Malvern to her assistance, for though equally in the dark himself as to the respective merits of "biled vittles" and "fried vittles," he had made up his mind what he would have, and came to the relief of his little companion by ordering hard-boiled eggs and Irish potatoes roasted in the skin; for these, argued the astute Malvern, will at least be clean,—a virtue which the most charitable exercise of imagination could not impute to anything on Mrs. Bottoms's table.

In due time the eggs and potatoes made their appearance, and our travelers fell upon them with the keen relish that long abstinence can impart to the plainest fare. Ruth had peeled an egg, and was in the act of carrying it to her lips, when Mrs. Bottoms, with overflowing hospitality, dipped her fingers into the salt and flung a pinch over the child's plate, exclaiming as she did so,—

"La, honey, you ain't got nigh enough salt on that aig; let me fix it for you."

As Mrs. Bottoms's fingers were never very daintily kept, and had been applied but an instant before to the ear of the Ethiopian fly-brusher, their contact did not, in Ruth's estimation, add savor to the salt; but she was too hungry to be fastidious, and did not leave the table till she and Audley between them had made an utter end of the eggs and potatoes.

After breakfast, Ruth was consigned to the charge of a fat Dinah, whom Mrs. Bottoms sent to attend her, while Audley, finding small temptation to linger in the dingy chamber allotted to him, after performing his morning ablutions in a cracked earthen basin with a fly-specked rim, lighted a cigar and strolled out on the piazza. For want of something better to do he occupied himself reading the various bills and notices posted on the wall, and had disposed of several square feet of railroad advertisements, with a proportional quantity of phosphates and compounds, and new patent cotton-gins, when his attention was suddenly arrested by the sound of music issuing from the tavern parlor. It was a grand strain,—the *Dona Nobis Pacem*, from Mozart's First Mass, and Audley was surprised to hear it, in such a place, rendered with such extraordinary skill. Approaching a window, where he could look into the room without being himself observed, he perceived his little *protegée* seated before a wheezy old piano, from which, in spite of its decrepitude, she contrived, by the magic of her touch, to draw exquisite melody.

Audley was passionately fond of music,

and though he had never studied it as a science, he possessed a correct ear and a cultivated taste, which made him an appreciative listener and a discriminating critic. He stood at the window for nearly an hour, without growing weary, while the child played on, unconscious of his presence, unconscious of everything but her music. Her execution, though not faultless, was very wonderful for so young a performer, and Audley noticed that her selections were of an elevated, classical style, very different from the slap-bang that usually pleases the fancy of children. He began to wonder if her vocal powers corresponded with the genius displayed in her touch, and was just debating with himself whether he should interrupt her by asking for a song, when, as if in answer to his thought, she commenced skimming over the prelude to various operatic airs, and finally selecting the "Angelus" from Maritana, she burst forth in a clear, ringing soprano, that astonished the hearer by its power and flexibility, as much as it charmed him by its sweetness. Entering the room softly, he stationed himself, unperceived, behind Ruth's chair, and when she reached the closing strain, joined her in a fine, strong tenor. The child ceased her song and turned abruptly round.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she cried, clapping her hands with delight. "I am so glad."

"You don't act like it," he replied, pretending to be hurt, "for you stopped singing as soon as I joined you."

"But that was because I didn't know; I thought no one was listening, and——"

"Why, I have been listening for the last hour. I don't wonder now that you want to be a *prima donna;* you will turn down Patti and Grisi and Sontag, and the whole batch of them, when you take to the boards. But come, finish that song for me; I shall never hear it again, my child, as long as I live, without thinking of you."

But the song was never finished; there came instead the shrill scream of a locomotive, and Father Perline appeared at the door to announce that it was time to prepare for departure.

"I will see you aboard," said Malvern, as a long train came thundering up to the little wooden depot. "It's an hour or more before I shall get off."

"Where are you going?" asked the priest.

"To California; by the overland route."

"To California! You have got a rough time ahead of you."

"Yes; but we military men"—and the venerable ecclesiastic smiled at the gravity with which the words fell from the youthful lips—"are used to roughing it; and then, think of the hunting on the plains! I hope it won't be many weeks before I can write home that I have killed a buffalo."

"Is your home in this State?" asked the priest, not sharing young Malvern's enthusiasm about buffalo-hunting.

"No; I am a Virginian," replied the young man, in the tone in which an ancient Roman might have asserted his citizenship. "Malvern is my name, Audley Malvern, of Heathmoor;" but as the priest did not seem particularly impressed by this announcement, he did not condescend to enlighten further the ignorance that had never heard of the Malverns of Heathmoor, one of the "first families" of the "Old Dominion."

Ruth and her guardian had by this time taken their places in the car. Audley stood on the platform outside talking with them till a second blast of the whistle, followed by a sudden lunging of the train forward, admonished him that it was time to make his adieux.

"Good-by, my little sweetheart," he said, running along on the platform, and holding the hand that Ruth extended to him through the open window; "don't forget me for any of those impertinent fellows that will be wanting to make love to you when you get to be the most captivating of *prima donnas*."

"I will never forget you," she answered, with artless simplicity. "I like you better than anybody I know except Father Perline."

"Do you, really? I hope you will bear that in mind when you are grown, and I come back from California to marry you."

The train moved away as he spoke, and the sweet, childish face was lost in a cloud of dense black smoke that came streaming backward from the engine.

"Poor little Ruth!" sighed Audley, as he stood gazing after the departing train; "there's a grim bridegroom waiting for you." And a feeling of strange loneliness came over him as he sauntered back, solitary, towards the little tavern.

Months afterward, when news from the States first reached the distant outpost at which Malvern was quartered, and he read in papers six weeks old the fearful story of the pestilence that had swept over far-off Southern cities, his thoughts turned again to the beautiful child whom

he had seen, an unconscious Iphigenia, calmly moving to her own destruction. She was too obscure and insignificant to be mentioned by name in the long black records of death, but he could not feel a doubt as to her fate. He laid aside his paper before he had read it through, and went and stood in the door of his tent whistling the "Angelus," till interrupted by the gentle adjuration of a comrade that "Malvern would stop that infernal noise and let a 'feller' go to sleep."

CHAPTER II.

WAITING FOR THE TRAIN.

TEN years after the events recorded in our last chapter, Audley Malvern once more crossed the threshold of Mrs. Bottoms's hotel. It must not be supposed that the recollection of his former repast at that elegant establishment had lured him thither again in quest of a meal. Indeed, as he walked up Mrs. Bottoms's front steps on this bleak December afternoon, the thought of his former visit never once came into his mind, nor was there anything, either in his own perturbed state of feeling or in the outward appearance of things about him, to recall that trifling episode of his career. The Mill Creek Junction that now received him was so different from the quiet little country station of ten years ago, that the oldest inhabitant scarcely recognized his home. True, the material aspect of the place was not altered, except with the change of seasons, but there was a strange bustle and confusion, a hurrying to and fro of busy feet, which seemed to indicate that Mill Creek Junction had, somehow, risen into unwonted importance: and so, in fact, it had.

It was towards the close of the great civil war, when the lines of railroad throughout the South had been so broken up by invading armies that no continuous system of communication existed between the different parts of the shattered Confederacy. It so happened that the shortest route across one of the desolated districts which interrupted the regular lines of travel lay between Mill Creek on one side, and a little place called Medway on the other, a distance of about one hundred miles, which the traveler had to get over as best he might. As the whole country between these places had been devastated by an invading army about two weeks before the date of which we are writing, neither provisions, horses, nor accommodations of any sort were to be obtained without the greatest difficulty. Some of the small farmers, whose property lay along the outskirts of what was significantly termed by the natives "the burnt district," had, with a keen eye to the "main chance," commenced running a line of wagons across the gap, in which travelers who were lucky enough to obtain the precedence could secure seats at the moderate charge of about fifty dollars a mile, in the paper currency of those days. But the number of conveyances fell far short of the persons to be accommodated, and the road was always so thronged with pedestrians as to appear almost like the route of an army on the march.

The wagon-trains did not set out from Mill Creek Junction direct, but from a place called Mill Creek Bridge, about nine miles distant, to which point the railroad had been repaired since the passage of the invading army. The work, however, had been hastily and imperfectly executed, and the new track was in such a condition that the light train which plied over it daily required from three to four hours for each trip, and was always behind time. It was advertised to connect with the Western Express, which arrived at Mill Creek one hour after noon, but when the passengers from the latter had alighted, they were informed that they would have to wait an indefinite time before the little make-shift of a train, on which they had to depend, would arrive at the station. Some of the more enterprising set off to walk to the wagons, but Audley Malvern was a man who liked to take things easy when he could, and as the cheery blaze that shone through the parlor windows of Mrs. Bottoms's hotel appeared far more inviting than the December blast that whistled outside, he directed his steps at once towards the hospitable mansion.

Ten years have made a great change in our hero's appearance. The handsome, boyish face has ripened into a manly countenance, which even its extreme beauty cannot render effeminate. The look of boyish merriment has given place to a more thoughtful expression, but there still lurks in the dark brown eyes a spirit of fun and hardy enjoyment that four years of severe trial have not been able to subdue. The blue coat and

shoulder-straps have given place to the gray and gold of a Confederate dragoon, which set off the fine, soldierly figure to great advantage. Extensive travel, and familiar intercourse with the best society of both continents, have cultivated and developed to the highest degree the rare advantages of person and manner with which Malvern was endowed by nature.

But time has dealt less tenderly with the fortunes than with the person of our hero. His father's magnificent estates, lying as they did along the banks of the Potomac, and almost within gunshot of the national capital, were among the very first to suffer from the devastations of war, and the splendid mansion that adorned them was burned by the enemy during the winter of '61. Old Mr. Malvern, already sinking under the weight of years, did not survive the destruction of the home that had sheltered his race since the good old days when Bunker Hill was a name unknown, and Washington was yet unborn. Audley was thus left, without fortune, and without resources, the only support of a mother and sister whose tastes and education were as little suited to their altered circumstances as his own. The elder of his two sisters had been married, several years before, to a distinguished army officer, and after the destruction of their home Mrs. Malvern retired, with her younger daughter, to a small country town near Charleston, where her son-in-law was stationed. Audley's command, throughout the war, had been kept so constantly in the field that he had little time to bestow upon his family, and for the last eighteen months he had been a prisoner in the enemy's lines. He was treated with extraordinary rigor, on account of some dashing but irregular exploit of his, in which he was accused of having transgressed the rules of civilized warfare. It was with the greatest difficulty that his release had finally been obtained; his life even, at one time, having been seriously menaced. It is at the close of this long imprisonment, after a hurried visit to his family, that Audley Malvern is again introduced to the reader's notice.

His position in the army had kept him from fully realizing, as yet, the change in his fortunes; he lived in the same style as his brother officers, and the hardships he experienced were only the inevitable necessities of war which he shared in common with the wealthiest of his comrades. He had seen so little of his mother and sister during the last four years, and they took such pains always to write cheerful letters to "poor Audley," and to make everything look bright and hopeful on his short visits to them, that he was never reminded of the necessity for making any unusual exertions on their account, so he lived on, taking things as easy as circumstances would permit, cherishing a vague intention of setting matters right, some day, by marrying a rich wife, as soon as he could find an heiress exactly suited to his mind,—an expectation on his part which experienced fortune-hunters will allow to be not a little unreasonable, since the higher you set your demands as regards money the more you limit your range of choice, and the less chance do you stand, in proportion, of getting anything tolerable in the woman herself.

Audley was extremely fastidious in regard to women, and as he had now passed the age at which men fall headlong and irretrievably in love on small provocation, it was no very easy matter to make his inclinations and his interests coincide. He had commenced paying attention to half a score of heiresses in succession, with an ultimate view to matrimony, but always found some cause of disgust, and broke away before matters came to a crisis, cursing himself all the time for a confounded fool, to let Miss Goldsborough's long nose or Miss Banks's bad spelling stand between him and fortune.

On the other hand, he had often been checked in his attentions to some penniless beauty, just in time to retreat with a good grace, by the reflection that he could not afford to marry for love altogether, and then he would wonder why the deuce it was a fellow couldn't find it just as easy to fall in love with a rich woman as with a poor one. Like all soldiers and sailors, and men generally, whose profession keeps them much apart from women, he gave himself up unreservedly to their society whenever occasion permitted, and would make love, out of hand, to anything in petticoats that came in his way. There are some men so prone to gallantry that they would make love to their great-grandmothers if they could find no one else to practice upon. These men never mean anything in particular by their pretty speeches, and do not easily fall seriously in love themselves, but they generally possess a tender, insinuating manner, that is attractive to all females, and dangerous to

inexperienced ones. They never deliberately intend to deceive; in fact, they do not realize that their protestations will not be forgotten by others as readily as by themselves, and so they go on, doing a great deal of mischief in the world unawares.

Audley Malvern was much given to this sort of trifling, and as the world judges of our conduct by the results rather than by our motives, he had acquired, without really deserving it, the unenviable reputation of a male flirt. Whatever faults he may have possessed, no man was ever more innocent of a deliberate intention to trifle with women, and so far from being the unmitigated coxcomb that the judicious reader has, doubtless, already pronounced him, half his errors were owing to the fact that he thought too little of his own fascinations of person and manner to calculate upon the impression they were likely to make upon others. Of course, he could not help knowing that he was an uncommonly good-looking fellow, and his position as an only son and only brother had rendered his home education a course of uninterrupted spoiling, while as the heir of a proud name and unlimited wealth, he had experienced all the temptations and dangers, as well as the advantages, attendant upon such a situation. Perhaps he had not passed the ordeal unscathed; he had, upon the whole, led a pretty fast life of it, and committed a good many errors, some of them far from trivial, but he had, at bottom, a good heart and a generous nature, which no influences of education or association could wholly pervert.

Such was Audley Malvern, when, after the lapse of a decade, he again set foot upon the threshold of Mrs. Bottoms's hotel. He paused and turned, at the entrance, to survey the scene without. The train from which he had just alighted was still discharging its load of human freight, and he was surprised, as he stood looking on, to see a lady descend from the hindmost car. The journey across the burnt district was such a formidable enterprise, that no woman would have ventured to undertake it except under circumstances of extraordinary urgency, and the appearance of a delicate-looking young person, bound upon such a hazardous expedition, naturally created surprise, the more so as she seemed to be traveling alone, and Southern ladies, in those days, rarely showed themselves abroad, under any circumstances, without a special male protector. She did not, however, lack for attention on that account, for if there is a virtue for which Southern gentlemen are eminent above all others, it is their deference and attention to unprotected females,—especially if the latter are young and pretty. To judge by this test, the lady in question seemed to be both, for she was attended by half a score of Confederate officers, who appeared eager to outstrip one another in her service. As she was closely veiled, Audley could not pronounce, at once, upon her face and features, but he was struck with the grace and elegance of her general appearance. Her figure was tall and beautifully proportioned, advantages which the bright plaid shawl she had thrown over her shoulders heightened while seeming to conceal. The rest of her dress was unpretending in color and material, but had a stylish, fashionable look about it, so different from the make-shift toilets of rebel ladies in those days, as to mark its wearer at once as having come from beyond the blockade. Audley, of course, did not observe her toilet in detail, as a woman would have done, but his taste in such matters, like that of most men of fashion, was sufficiently cultivated for him to know when a woman was well dressed, without being able to tell exactly what made her so.

The lady raised her veil for the first time as she entered the house, and Audley then observed that she was young and very handsome, with beautiful blonde hair of the pale yellow hue that poets rave about, and great melancholy eyes, whose color he could not define. He touched his hat as she passed, and walked in after her, taking the van of her little corps of attendants, and wondering to himself how the deuce it had happened that he had managed to ride a hundred miles on the same train with a pretty woman and never know it, though the matter was simple enough, if he had only reflected that he had been fast asleep all the morning, in a different car, worn out with the fatigue of three successive days' travel.

Many of the passengers had already sought refuge under Mrs. Bottoms's roof, and the little parlor was pretty well filled, when Audley entered in the wake of the fair stranger. The appearance of a lady created something of a stir among the knot of loungers grouped round the fire. Two pair of heels were hastily withdrawn from the mantel-piece, and the contents of half a dozen pipes emptied on the

hearth, while the owners sprang to their feet, and proffered chairs to the newcomer as liberally as if she had been a Mormon harem. As Audley came in immediately behind her, it was taken for granted that he belonged to her in some capacity or other, and the person who occupied the chair nearest to the one she had taken politely tendered it to her supposed escort, a mistake of which the latter did not hesitate to avail himself, as there was no other seat in the room vacant, and he was never troubled with unnecessary scruples where his personal comfort was concerned.

The cold was unusually severe for a Southern winter, and the travelers drew their chairs close round the fire. The lady seated herself among them with a quiet self-possession of manner, as though used to contact with strangers and quite indifferent to their presence. She placed the tips of two dainty little boots upon the rug, and, taking off her gloves, held out her hands to warm. They were very white, and exquisitely shaped, and Audley noticed a splendid diamond, that glittered like a star, on one of her fingers. She wore no other ornament, except a string of carved ebony beads around her neck,—a decoration so fashionable at the time, that it would have attracted no attention but for the exquisite workmanship.

The presence of a lady threw a certain degree of restraint over the men, and no one spoke for some time, until at last an old gentleman, the only civilian in the company, turned to his right-hand neighbor with some trifling inquiry as to the journey before them, and received for his consolation the significant reply that the best walker was likely to get first to Medway. This was the signal for a chorus of questions and answers, and everybody had some direful experience to relate, either of his own or of some other person who had just made the trip, or who had seen somebody else that had. The lady listened with an expression of increasing anxiety, and finally, during a short pause in the conversation, she turned to Audley, who was sitting nearest her, and asked, timidly, if he could tell her whether railroad communication was much interrupted beyond Medway.

"That depends upon what direction you wish to take," he replied, with a slight bow. "Some of the railroads are very much cut up, I believe, even beyond that point."

"I am trying to reach my home," the lady said, "down in the 'piney woods' of Georgia, where it seems hardly probable that an invading army would care to penetrate. Do you know whether the road from Medway to South Ambury has been disturbed?"

"I believe not," replied Malvern, "but cannot say positively. I am going to South Ambury myself, and as we are to be fellow-travelers so far, I shall be happy, with your permission, to render you any assistance in my power during the journey. You will find crossing the burnt district an arduous undertaking for a lady, and this must be my apology for the liberty I have taken in offering my services."

"I thank you," said the lady, smiling; "it is a liberty that needs no apology. This is my first experience in traveling alone; indeed, I have not traveled at all since I was a child, so that I am very ignorant about it, I fear, and shall no doubt have frequent occasion to avail myself of your kind offer."

"The more frequent the better I shall like it," said Audley, with more sincerity than such protestations usually contain.

Again the lady thanked him, and Audley noticed that her voice, which was wonderfully soft and musical, had that peculiar patrician accent which is the most unmistakable criterion of high breeding and elegant associations. He wanted her to say something more, just for the pleasure of hearing it, but a sudden stop was put to all conversation just at this moment by the shrill screech of a locomotive, and a startling cry of "All aboard!" from some one outside, that caused a hasty stampede from the little parlor, as the travelers snatched up their effects and rushed out to secure seats in the train for Mill Creek Bridge, which was always overcrowded. Audley went with the rest, promising to return for the lady when he had secured her a seat. It proved, however, a false alarm,—merely the train that had brought them to Mill Creek switching off some cars.

When Audley came back, he found the lady almost alone in the little parlor, seated at the rattling old piano that still stood in one corner, playing very softly an air, the sound of which brought over him that strange, ghostly feeling which sometimes haunts us with a vague impression that the experiences of the present moment have been known before in some other dim far-off world. There is a wonderful power of association in sound; he who hears again, after many years,

some old forgotten strain, finds his thoughts returning, unbidden, to the days when it was caroled fresh and clear by lips that are now, perhaps, silent forever. Forgotten faces look out upon him from the twilight of the past, and voices long hushed grow musical again; buried loves, forsaken hopes, vanished joys, rise from the graves where the dead past had buried its dead, called to life once more by the magic power of a simple melody.

Thus it was with Malvern as he stood watching the beautiful stranger and listening to the old familiar tune she was playing. It was the air from Maritana that he had heard once before in that very room years ago. Every incident connected with that old time now flashed upon his mind as vividly as if it had occurred but yesterday, and he began to regard the unconscious musician with a strange confused emotion, as if she had been a ghost. Something in her look and manner seemed unaccountably familiar to him, and the longer he watched her the more powerful did this impression become, till at last, with a sudden flash of memory, the name, Ruth Harfleur, broke from his lips. The lady did not hear his whispered exclamation, but another person did, and turned his eyes with a fierce, startled look towards the speaker. They were very remarkable eyes, of a deep poetical blue, yet flashing with a wild, restless light, strangely out of keeping with their celestial hue.

The owner of these restless orbs was a tall, spare man, past the prime of life apparently, though there lingered on his features such traces of care and conflict with passion that it would have been hard to say whether time or suffering had told most heavily upon him. He stood apart in a little recess formed by a projecting angle of the chimney, as though desirous of avoiding observation, but there was something in his appearance that could not fail to fix the attention when once the eyes had been directed towards him. His form was still erect in all the pride of manhood, and his countenance, sere and weather-beaten as it was, retained yet traces of extraordinary beauty. There were no distinctive traits of nationality about him, nor was it possible to form, from his dress and appearance, a probable conjecture as to his rank or station in life. These cosmopolitan traits, however, would seem to indicate that he was not a native Southerner, in whom the marks of caste and country are always unmistakably developed.

This stranger was regarding the lady at the piano, when Audley entered, with a look of intense and eager scrutiny that nothing could divert, until the involuntary exclamation of the latter caused him to fix his gaze for a moment upon the young officer. No sooner had he done so than Audley, though apparently absorbed in contemplating the figure at the piano, seemed, by the subtle magnetism that lurks in the eyes, to become aware that some one was observing him, and instantly turned to meet the stranger's gaze. There was something in the eager, questioning look of the latter that excited his curiosity, but the man, annoyed at finding himself an object of attention, seemed suddenly to recollect himself, and turned abruptly away. At the same moment the lady ceased playing, and was about to rise from the piano, as the room was rapidly filling with men again, when Malvern interposed.

"Let me entreat you," he said, bending low and looking into her eyes with that insinuating glance of his which no woman could ever resist, "to play that air once more. It recalls an incident of my life that memory loves to dwell upon."

"So it does of mine," answered the lady, with a quiet smile, and turned to comply with his request.

He stationed himself behind her as she began to play, just as he had stood ten years ago behind little Ruth Harfleur, and when she reached the closing strain sang, in a low, but clear and musical voice, the words he had sung there ten years before. At the sound of his voice the lady suddenly raised her hands from the keys, and, turning quickly round, their eyes met in a look of mutual recognition. For several seconds she sat staring helplessly into his face with a look of mingled pleasure and confusion, unable to articulate a word. Malvern, never surprised or excited at anything, was the first to speak.

"Have you no word of greeting for an old friend, Miss Harfleur?" he said, extending his hand, with a cordial smile.

"None that will half express my pleasure at the meeting," she answered, recovering herself, and frankly returning his salutation. "Why didn't you tell me it was you at once?"

"Because I had a foolish desire that you should recognize me of your own accord."

"And how came you to know me?"

"By your music; don't you remember

my telling you once that I should never hear that song again without thinking of you? And my memory, you see, is true to the instincts of my heart."

The lady blushed and turned away. This man was the hero of her childish fancy, and his image had been enshrined in her heart for years, with a tenderness that she was not conscious of herself until she saw him standing there before her. Ruth Harfleur's life had been a very bleak and desolate one. Exiled from home, she knew not why, since her earliest childhood, she had grown up to womanhood a lonely, isolated being, her tender heart chilled by neglect, and left to feed upon its own unclaimed riches. Her convent training had kept her apart from men, and thus the image of the handsome lieutenant had lived on in her childish memory without a rival. The death of the good old priest, the only being in the world who had called forth the deep affection of which her nature was capable, had concentrated her thoughts more entirely upon the only other person who had manifested a kindly interest in her, at a time when, young as she was, she had learned to expect nothing for herself but indifference and neglect. At first, in her childish simplicity, she had not doubted that he would come back and marry her, as he said. When she grew older, she knew better, but she still identified him with the heroes of the few novels she read, and dreamed beautiful dreams about the time when she should be a famous *prima donna* and captivate him anew with her voice.

By and by these visions faded, too, and left behind only a sweet and tender memory. It was not love, but neither was it a very safe feeling with which to encounter a man who could so easily change indifference itself to love, and who laid so little stress upon his own conquests, that half the time he was not even aware of having made them. Had he been a plain, prosaic person, of ordinary appearance and address, Ruth's childish visions would have faded away like a twilight cloud; but here he was before her, handsome, graceful, captivating, beyond all that her romantic dreams had painted him, alluding tenderly to the past, as though he, too, had cherished the memory of it as a precious thing. She had too little knowledge of men to suspect that he might do that just the same, though he had never once thought of her in all these years, and would probably never think of her again if they were to part to-morrow. Their conversation was carried on in a low tone, to avoid attracting the attention of the other travelers, which, added to a certain deferential tenderness that always characterized Malvern's manner with women, made his most trifling compliments seem almost like a declaration of love. Miss Harfleur felt an embarrassment in the silence that succeeded his last remark, and resumed the conversation at hazard, by wondering if they would ever have recognized each other without the music.

"Yes," answered Audley, decisively, "I am sure I would have made you out sooner or later; there are some things about you that can never change."

"If you were a woman," she replied, smiling, "I might feel constrained to say the same of you, but as ten years do not make such a fearful stride in a man's life, I suppose I need not feel afraid to confess that I think you are much altered; indeed, I should never have recognized you from your looks alone." And she glanced at the heavy moustache and whiskers, and the hardy, sunburned hue that had replaced the boyish bloom of twenty-two. The handsome colonel was fully aware that the change was not to his detriment, though he had the grace not to betray the flattering consciousness.

"I am sorry to hear you say that," he answered, with a light laugh, "for you seemed to like me as I was; do you remember what you promised me when we parted? And I am a colonel now," he added, playfully stroking the decorations on his collar.

"Yes; but I was to be a famous *prima donna*, you know, and I am only plain Ruth Harfleur."

She uttered the words in a tone of sadness, as though some painful chord had been touched. Audley, with a well-bred desire for avoiding unpleasant subjects, undertook to give the conversation a different turn by inquiring after her guardian, Father Perline. The allusion was an unfortunate one for his purpose; the lady's brow became more clouded, and her voice assumed a deeper sadness, as she replied,—

"He is dead; died of yellow fever the summer of the great pestilence, but not until he had carried peace and consolation to thousands of perishing souls."

"Do you know," said Audley, regarding her attentively, "that I thought of you only as dead after I saw you depart with Father Perline on your perilous journey? Your escape seems almost a miracle."

"I did not escape altogether," she an-

swered. "I was seized with the fever three days after our arrival in New Orleans; but I got over it, and then Father Perline carried me about with him to nurse the sick. So many people had died, or gone away, that they were glad to get even a child to help take care of the sick. Sometimes I was left in charge of a whole family, and often there would be no one but me to close the eyes of the dead. I dreaded it very much at first, but death was so thick around me that I soon grew familiar with it. I was called the 'Little Nun,' 'Saint Ruth,' the 'Angel of Death,' and other names that the poorer classes in New Orleans remember to this day."

"Those were dreadful experiences for a child," said Malvern, regarding her with a look of wondering admiration. "You began early the work of a Sister of Charity; how comes it they didn't make a nun of you?"

"I never meant to be a nun," she answered, decisively, "and no one except my father cared to put any constraint upon my inclinations. I always intended to be an opera-singer, and studied under Violini for the stage, but my father interfered; and I suppose it is right to obey one's father," she added, with a sigh that proved obedience in this case to have been an act of duty, not of love.

"After the surrender of the city," she continued, "the convent of St. Sacrament was suppressed on account of the rebel proclivities of the inmates, and as I had no other home, there was nothing left for me but to make the best of my way back to my father's house."

The tone of bitterness with which the words were uttered did not escape Malvern. He remembered the artless tale of neglect and cruelty her childish lips had unfolded years before, and wondered if the dark suspicion which then haunted his mind had really any foundation in fact. He had no time, however, to pursue his reflections on this subject, for just as Miss Harfleur finished speaking the shriek of an approaching locomotive inspired fresh hopes of departure, and sent the impatient travelers hurrying once more towards the depot.

CHAPTER III.

A LADY SHOWS HER RING.

It was no false alarm this time. A rumbling old locomotive, very much out of joint, to which were attached three dilapidated boxes and a used-up passenger-car, steamed slowly up to the low, wooden depot, and stood puffing like an asthmatic alderman, while the people inside scrambled out to make way for the people outside who were scrambling in. The crazy passenger-car, though reserved with much formality as a first-class coach, really possessed very questionable advantages over the rude boxes into which the rank and file of creation were allowed to tumble themselves at pleasure. The windows were all broken out, and for seats the only choice was between benches without backs and benches without bottoms. Audley selected one of the former, and, having deposited his companion, went out to see after the baggage. On his return he noticed that the stranger who had attracted his attention in Mrs. Bottoms's parlor had taken a seat facing Miss Harfleur, on the opposite side of the car, and was regarding her with a look of rapt attention. Ruth was busied in pinning a corner of her shawl over the broken pane at her side, through which the December blast came pouring in, a chilling reminder of the wintry storm brewing outside.

She had taken off her gloves, the better to accomplish this impromptu upholstery, and the diamond on her finger glittered like a star in the dusky twilight that pervaded the car. Audley observed that the man's attention seemed now specially directed towards this jewel, which he noted with a scrutiny that might naturally, under the circumstances, excite suspicion. He turned away uneasily on encountering Malvern's gaze a second time, and, opening a newspaper, kept his eyes fixed upon it with studied reserve until interrupted by the inspection of passports.

This ceremony was conducted with becoming solemnity by a wooden-legged conscript, accompanied by a small boy with a gun, styled respectively the Inspector and the Guard. As Audley had forgotten to provide himself with passports on leaving Richmond, the appearance of these formidable officials caused him at first some uneasiness, but, observing that they examined Miss Harfleur's passport upside down, he boldly produced, in place of his own, an unreceipted tailor's bill, which was duly inspected, and returned with the usual formula, "All right, sir."

The stranger's turn came next. He produced the required document, and

gave it to the inspector without raising his eyes from the newspaper behind which he had taken refuge from Audley Malvern's gaze. There was something in his aspect which seemed to excite the suspicion of the illiterate official, who, whatever may have been his deficiencies in other respects, was endowed in an ample degree with that keen instinct of nationality by which Southern Americans seem able to detect, under any disguise, one who is not of the "chosen people." Such a suspicion was of grave consequence in those days, when the words "foreigner" and "enemy" were almost synonymous to a people upon whom the whole world looked askance. The inspector accordingly scrutinized the passport of the stranger with special care: that is, he turned it on both sides; looked at it with first one eye shut, then the other; held it up to the light; felt the paper cautiously, as though it might be explosive; then handed it to the guard, who, making nothing of it, gave it back to the inspector, and finally, as no evidences of treason or conspiracy could be got out of the document, it was returned without comment to the owner.

Colonel Malvern watched this little pantomime with much amusement, and, during the evolutions of the paper in the hands of the officials, saw enough of its contents to advise him that the stranger had come from New Orleans, by flag of truce,—a fact which, Audley thought, might possibly account for the peculiar interest with which he seemed to regard Miss Harfleur, she having just come from the same place.

"Have you ever seen that person before?" he asked her, a little abruptly, indicating by a gesture whom he meant.

Ruth threw a careless glance towards the man, and answered,—

"No; never. I think he was on the train that brought us to Mill Creek, but I didn't notice him particularly. Why do you ask?"

"Because his passport states that he is from New Orleans, and I have seen him once or twice looking very hard at you, with an expression of deeper interest than a mere stranger would be likely to exhibit."

"No," Ruth repeated, taking a second and more leisurely survey of the stranger, who kept his eyes studiously averted, "I am very certain that I never saw him in New Orleans, for he has a face one would not be likely to forget."

"Do you think it a handsome one?"

"No, not exactly. What do you think of it?"

"It is a very remarkable face, and, I might have added, rather a fine one, if I had not caught him eying that handsome ring of yours, just now, in a very suspicious manner."

"There are some singular circumstances connected with this ring," said Miss Harfleur, drawing the jewel slowly from her finger and placing it in Malvern's hand, "that make me regard it almost with suspicion myself. Read the inscription inside."

Audley did as she requested.

"I see your name engraved here," he said, "but there is nothing very singular in that, is there?"

"If you notice more carefully," replied his companion, "you will see that the engraver meant no allusion to me, and it is only by a strange coincidence that the inscription happens to contain my name."

Audley held the ring up to the light and examined it closely.

"Yes, I see now," he said. "The inscription is old and indistinct, so that I did not read it all at first. A Bible reference, is it not?" he added, as he deciphered more fully the engraving, which was simply this,—

Ruth, ch. i. 16, 17,

in old Roman characters.

"Yes." And Miss Harfleur repeated the beautiful words of Ruth to Naomi. "It is very strange," she added, musingly, as she received the ring from him again and slipped it back upon her finger.

"Not at all," replied Malvern, smiling; "on the contrary, it seems to me very natural that one should say those words to you."

"But it is strange," she continued, coloring slightly in reply to his compliment, "that I should receive a ring bearing such an inscription in the way that I received this. It was thrown to me in a bouquet the night before my departure from New Orleans, at which time I made my first and only appearance on the stage as a professional singer. The great operatic star, Sonata, had come over from Havana, and was to appear in 'La Fille du Régiment.' The bills were posted, notices were out in all the morning papers, and there was tremendous excitement throughout the city over the reopening of the opera-house, when, at the eleventh hour, the *prima donna* was

seized with a sudden and violent illness, which made it impossible for her to sing that night. The manager and performers were in the utmost consternation, until Signor Tognio, leader of the orchestra, who had frequently assisted in the Cathedral choir, where I was employed as chief soprano, bethought himself of me. I knew the principal *rôle* of nearly all the grand operas, and he had often complimented my rendering of certain parts of 'La Fille du Régiment.' So, after consulting with Sonata and my old instructor, Violini, they settled it among them that I was to take the place of the *prima donna*. I refused at first, because my father had positively forbidden my ever appearing on the stage, but they insisted that there could be no harm in doing it just this once under the shield of an inviolable incognito. Most of my acquaintance had left the city before the surrender, and as Sonata and I were somewhat alike in general appearance, it was hardly probable that the fraud would ever be detected, and if it should leak out, by any accident, they all promised me, on their oaths, never to reveal who had acted the part of the real Sonata. I was under many obligations to Violini, which made it hard to refuse an urgent request of his, still, I felt serious doubts as to my capacity for sustaining the character of so celebrated a songstress. The praises of the two men, however, together with the assurances of Sonata herself, finally satisfied me on that score. I am mortal, and therefore can be flattered. I am a woman, and therefore can be persuaded; and so the end of it all was that I actually did appear as Sonata in the *rôle* of *La Vivandière*, and was received with storms of applause, which I attributed to the reputation of that glorious *artiste*. After that martial air 'Search Through the Wide World,' I was all but smothered under bouquets thrown upon the stage, in one of which I found this ring. I carried it to Sonata after the performance, thinking of course it had been intended for her, but she declined the trophy, generously declaring that I was entitled to both the honors and profits of the evening. I did not discover the inscription until next day, when I examined the ring more closely; and it has been a puzzle and a mystery to me ever since."

"Why, you must have had admirers and lovers enough to account for anything of that sort," said Audley, with a laugh. "Think now, and confess honestly, was there not some one among all the poor fellows you left behind in New Orleans who would be likely to bestow upon you such a testimonial of his appreciation?"

Miss Harfleur shook her head. "Life in a convent does not afford many opportunities for attracting lovers," she answered. "I never saw any men but priests and my music-masters, and I do not think any of them would have cared to *pelt* me with diamonds. Besides, this antique jewel has every appearance of being some old family relic. Observe the setting, it cannot be less than half a century old, and the engraving how worn it is. But why should the owner have parted with it? And then the coincidence of the name,—there are the mysteries. No one in all that assembly could possibly know that I was called Ruth."

Audley himself had an unromantic suspicion that the ring was the property of some aristocratic *Orléanoise*, which had fallen into the hands of "bummers" after the surrender of the city, and that it had been flung at the feet of the beautiful songstress, in a sudden transport of enthusiasm, by some vagabond who could easily afford to be generous with what had cost him nothing. He did not, however, hint this prosaic but highly probable solution of the mystery to his companion, as it would only destroy her respect for and pleasure in the trophy without giving any clue to the rightful owner.

The foregoing conversation had been carried on in an undertone, which the rumbling of the train rendered inaudible to all but the parties engaged. The difficulty of keeping their seats, owing to the faultiness of the track, which now sent the cars careening from side to side, like a ship in a storm, and now tumbled the passengers pell-mell into one another's laps as the whole train was stopped with a sudden jerk by a broken cross-tie or a sunken sleeper, put an end to further discourse, and the next five or six miles were traversed in most unsocial silence, while the cumbersome train floundered on its way over the half-sunken rails.

The brief December day had already drawn to a close when Mill Creek Bridge was signaled from the engine, and the wintry clouds that had been slowly gathering since morning were now rolling in billowy, black masses overhead, deepening the gloom of a moonless night into almost Cimmerian darkness. Miss Harfleur clung to her companion's arm with a feeling of mingled awe and alarm as

she emerged from the dim and cheerless car into the still more dim and cheerless night. The wildness and novelty of the scene around her were well calculated to excite both the fears and the fancy of one bred in the quiet seclusion of a convent, and accustomed to view the outside world only in the artificial life of a great city. Here, no habitation of any kind was to be seen, save a rude log hut, built there as a temporary shelter for workmen employed on the railroad. Round a small clearing, just in front of this shanty, which was flanked on one side by a towering forest, and on the other by a deep ravine, through which the swollen waters of Mill Creek were rushing with a tumultuous roar, was ranged a line of carts and wagons waiting to receive the passengers from Mill Creek Junction and convey them to a neighboring village, rejoicing in the lofty name of Palmyra, where they were to pass the night. Large fires, blazing in front of the cabin, shed a weird glare over the surrounding space, and over the motley company gathered round them. Negro drivers were hurrying to and fro, flourishing their whips, and hallooing to their teams, with an air of busy importance; while knots of soldiers were grouped about the fires, preparing for a night's bivouac, or snatching a hasty meal before departing on their march to Palmyra. Now and then the gilded trappings of some starred and belted officer would flash like a meteor on the night, as he hurried from point to point, issuing commands, or paused a moment in the light to enjoy the genial warmth of the flames; but oftener did the impartial blaze reveal only rags and scars, and grimy cheeks, as the weary veteran flung down his knapsack, and stretched himself on the ground to bask in the cheery fire-light. The rising wind howled dismally through the forest, while ever and anon low mutterings of distant thunder sounded ominously on the night causing many an upturned eye to glance uneasily at the lowering canopy overhead, which seemed to grow blacker and heavier every instant. Audley's life had made him familiar with such scenes, and he was in no way moved by them, but he felt the little hand on his arm tremble violently, and saw the dark, melancholy eyes turned with a half-frightened, half-questioning look to his own.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, gently, answering the mute appeal, and drawing Ruth's wrappings more closely about her. "You will find our new mode of travel very rough, I am afraid, and the presence of so many rude soldiers is not calculated to add to its attractiveness, but never mind them; only be as blind and deaf as you can, and if you should happen to hear or see something a little uncouth now and then, attribute it to inadvertence on their part, for wild and reckless as they seem, I am convinced that not one of these poor devils would intentionally be wanting in the respect due to a lady."

The justice of Audley's remark was immediately verified, for as he led his companion to the fire the laughter and loud talk instantly subsided, while the group around it made way, respectfully, for the lady. One burly fellow, with bare feet and a ragged shirt, spread his blanket, with the gallantry of a Raleigh, under her feet, while others piled up sticks of wood and flung their coats over them to make a seat for her. Some officers standing near invited the newcomers to partake of a hot punch they had just prepared, and a tall Georgia major, in a tremendous overcoat and top boots, politely offered to take charge of the colonel's wife while the latter went to secure a conveyance. Audley observed the crimson flush that this mistake brought to the lady's cheek, and hastened to correct it.

"With your permission, Miss Harfleur," he said, bowing his thanks to the major, "I will leave you for a few minutes to the care of this gentleman, while I go and see what are the chances for continuing our journey;" and with that he directed his steps towards the line of wagons in the background.

It was no easy matter to obtain a conveyance. Several wagons had been forcibly seized and driven off by lawless soldiers, and those that remained were already filled. As soon as it was known, however, that the colonel had a lady under his charge the other travelers held back, and allowed him first choice of places. After hastily inspecting the motley train, he selected a strong plantation wagon, drawn by a stout six-mule team. There were some eight or ten men seated in it, but they readily made way for the lady, and assisted Malvern in arranging a comfortable niche for her in the rear, where she was snugly disposed on a pile of fodder, with water-proofs tucked around her, and a large traveling-trunk placed as a screen between her and the crowd of men sitting forward. Audley sat himself down beside her, and the herculean major, to whose care she had been tem-

porarily consigned, proceeded to climb in after, with two of his subalterns, despite the protest of the driver, a very black old darkey, who rejoiced in the cheerful appellation of Uncle Grief.

At last all was ready, and the long train of wagons began to move slowly forward, accompanied by a line of pedestrians who flanked it in two files on either side of the road. The motley procession was lighted on its way by torches of blazing pine, borne aloft by the negro guides, and producing a most picturesque effect, as they revealed the lengthened train winding its way laboriously over the miry road, and lighted the grim wintry landscape with their lurid glare, now flashing upon silent pools filled by the winter rains, now glancing upon some fantastic human figure, and bringing it into bold relief against the dark background of forest that flanked the way on either hand. The trees met in a rude arch overhead, lacing their great blackened arms together, and smiting and clashing them in the wind like giants in a battle. Accustomed as he was to a life of adventure and excitement, Audley could not help feeling impressed with the wild grandeur of the scene, while Ruth, forgetting all her first alarm, flung aside the wrappings that enveloped her, the better to survey a picture so exciting to her poetical fancy. Audley rose and stood beside her, making her rest on his arm to guard against being thrown from her feet by the sudden thumps and jolts that scarcely suffered her to maintain her balance, even with the aid of such a support.

"I thought you would be frightened," he said, encouragingly, "but you stand it all like a heroine. I really believe you are beginning to enjoy this wild way of traveling."

"Yes," she replied, "I do like it now, though I felt a little frightened at first. I have all my life been longing for adventures of some sort, and this suits me better than the monotonous routine of a convent. I would never make a saint, I fear."

"But you would suit exactly for a soldier's wife," he whispered, with a low laugh.

Ruth made no reply, for at that moment some veterans in the van struck up a favorite war song, and the strain was echoed from group to group until the whole caravan joined, as one man, in a chorus that made the very heavens ring. The crude effusions that made up a great part of the heroic literature of those days, and that only bring a smile, perhaps, to the lips of the stranger, were full of poetic fire to the people whose burning hearts found utterance in them, and, like the good old Methodist revival songs in which skeptics and worldlings see only a subject for scoffing, had something about them, when chanted by thousands of singers whose souls were on their lips, that could not fail to fire every tongue and inspire every heart.

Ruth listened awhile in silence, then, carried away by the ecstasy of the moment, she opened her lips and threw the whole power of her magnificent voice into the song. Audley, who had joined in the chorus, ceased singing before she had sounded half a dozen notes, and gave himself up to the delight of listening. He had heard all the famous *prima donnas* of the day, from the elder Patti down to Piccolomini, but never before had the power of any human voice so impressed him. His enthusiasm was suddenly cooled, however, by the actual bursting, just at this moment, of the storm that had been gathering so long. A few warning drops, accompanied by an admonitory peal of thunder, sent all who were fortunate enough to possess such means of protection cowering under their blankets and water-proofs, while those who had none soon found only too good reason to lament their deficiency.

The big rain-drops fell slowly at first, then gradually came faster and thicker, till they fell in torrents that extinguished the torches, and converted the road into a miry lagoon, through which men and beasts had to plow their way with infinite toil. All was now a scene of indescribable confusion. The negro drivers had been unceremoniously dismounted to make way for more aristocratic wayfarers, tired of their long march through the mud. Uncle Grief had been degraded with the rest, and, as the doughty young captain who held the reins in his stead was entirely ignorant of the road, our friends were in no little danger of getting their necks broken. Occasional flashes of the pale sheet-lightning that frequently accompanies winter storms at the South would reveal dangerous pits and gullies, on the very brink of which they were recklessly driving, while more than once they were nearly upset by running against the trunks of fallen trees that the wind had blown across the road, or over stumps that their amateur postilion ran foul of by getting out of it. The grinding of the

heavy wagon-wheels through the mud, the ceaseless plash of the horses' feet on the deluged highway, the roaring of the wind and patter of the rain, mingled with the cries of the guides and teamsters, made a strange confusion of sounds, heightened now and then by hot vociferations and angry dialogues among the discontented pedestrians belonging to the train. "Halloo, all in the mud!" "D—n these infernal roads, a fellow can't keep his feet on 'em!" "Go to the devil, you black rascal! why didn't you tell me that mudhole was there?" And Cuffee, choking with suppressed laughter as the discomfitted son of Mars shook himself out of the mire, would stammer forth his defense: "Lord 'a mercy, massa, how you 'spec a poor nigger for keep you outen de mud when dar ain't nuffin but mud everywhar, an' him can't keep hissef out?"

Such were the sounds that constantly reached Miss Harfleur's ear, though never intended for a lady to hear. The darkness and confusion increased at every step, and the classic walls of Palmyra seemed to recede as the travelers advanced, so slow was the progress made. At last, when the patience of all was nearly exhausted, and the Georgia major had just finished blowing up the innocent guides for the twentieth time because Palmyra was not at hand, a sudden turn in the road revealed the lights of the village glimmering in the distance, and revived hope in the sinking hearts of men and beasts. The weary mules were urged to their utmost speed, and in a few minutes more the whole caravan was rolling through the streets of the little hamlet that bore at least one point of resemblance to its historic namesake in the ruin and desolation that had come upon both. It was a very small village, containing not more than a dozen houses, scarcely one-third of which were now habitable. The only inn, bearing the ambitious title of the "Indian Queen Hotel," had been partially destroyed by bombs. But two rooms were fit for occupancy, and in one of these the only son of the landlady, a poor widow whose husband had fallen at Chickamauga, lay ill with the measles. Yet, a shelter of some sort must be had, for the fury of the storm went on increasing every instant; besides, it was now past ten o'clock, and Uncle Grief declared that his mules were too tired "to go a step furder ef Satum hissef was a drivin' 'em,"—a statement which it needed but a glance at the poor beasts to confirm. There was nothing for it, accordingly, but to make the best of such accommodations as offered, and trust to Providence and free ventilation for security from infection. The first-class passengers, therefore, installed themselves at the Indian Queen, while the teamsters and common soldiers packed off to bivouac among the ruins, wherever they could find the remains of a roof or a wall to afford them shelter from the storm.

A cheerful fire was blazing on the parlor hearth of the dilapidated Indian Queen, when Colonel Malvern entered with Miss Harfleur, that lighted up the blackened walls, and gave to the otherwise comfortless apartment an almost inviting aspect. Some of the other travelers had preceded them, and the roaring chimney was enveloped in a cloud of steam that issued from their dripping garments. Miss Harfleur's water-proofs had protected her so well that her clothing was scarcely damp; but the circle round the fire insisted that she should join them, and a warm nook was prepared for her in the chimney corner, and a seat beside her own resigned to her escort.

Meanwhile, the major, who had established himself caterer to the company, began to inquire into their chances for getting supper. Mrs. Hanner, the landlady, had nothing to offer, and was herself living upon the soldier's rations allowed her son by the Government; but there happened to be a small supply-train with commissary stores for the army camped in the tavern yard, and upon these the major began to forage. As he was himself an officer in the commissary department, he could make some show of authority for his act, but even without that, the small guard attached to the train was too weak to protect it from the band of hungry travelers the major could bring to his assistance.

Colonel Malvern's servant, Archie, who had learned to serve his master in every capacity during their many wanderings, was installed as cook, an office which he discharged very creditably considering the materials at his command; and when people are very hungry, warm hoe-cake and bacon broiled on the coals are not such unpalatable diet as an epicure might suppose. To complete the feast, Miss Harfleur remembered that she had several packages of chocolate in her trunk, which she offered to prepare for the benefit of her fellow-travelers, if Mrs. Hanner could furnish anything to boil it in. That excellent lady, accordingly, produced from the wreck of her kitchen a stout hominy-

pot, which she declared was the only thing she had left "fitten to bile vittles in," and with this rude utensil and a little condensed milk, appropriated from the Government stores, Archie prepared, under Miss Harfleur's directions, a beverage that seemed to the wet and weary travelers like a draught of Olympian nectar.

The utmost cordiality and good humor now prevailed. The party at the Indian Queen had become so well acquainted with one another by this time, and the circumstances under which they were thrown together were so well calculated to banish everything like constraint and formality, that this hap-hazard company assumed spontaneously the bearing of invited guests in a private drawing-room; and Miss Harfleur's position seemed more like that of the belle of a fashionable assembly than of an unprotected wanderer cast by chance among a crowd of strange men. There was one, and only one, who seemed not to share in the general feeling of good-fellowship: the man with the strange fiery blue eyes sat apart, moody and alone, all the evening, eating very little, and speaking not at all.

In any other country than our own, Miss Harfleur's position would have been unspeakably awkward, not to say equivocal, and her reputation would probably suffer for it afterwards; but in our less artificial state of society, manners are freer in proportion as morals are purer, and young women are not hedged in with such rigid conventional barriers, because their habitual virtue and the deference which men pay to it make other protection unnecessary. Every Southern woman knows that so long as she conducts herself like a lady she will receive from her countrymen the treatment due to one, under whatever circumstances she may be placed; and, indeed, all the world over, I think, men are generally quite ready to recognize the worth of modesty and refinement in women. Miss Harfleur's present situation was certainly not one in which a lady would voluntarily place herself in any land, but while she regretted it, and was keenly alive to its awkwardness, as any woman of delicacy could not but be, she was beset by none of those scruples of false delicacy that would have haunted any woman but an American in the like predicament. Young, beautiful, alone at night in a crowd of strange men, with no protector but a young and handsome colonel of dragoons, whose presence of itself would have been compromising in any other country, a French or an English girl would have felt her reputation forever gone; but in our purer state of society women have not yet learned to regard their natural protectors only as possible seducers and betrayers. Miss Harfleur knew that her presence alone was a sufficient guarantee for the good behavior of every man who was admitted under the same roof that sheltered her. So far from being unprotected, every mother's son there felt himself her champion, and the least attempt at insolence or rudeness would have been the death-warrant of the offender.

It was past midnight when the supper was disposed of, for the reader must remember that it not only had to be cooked and eaten but foraged for. The guests of the Indian Queen now began to be painfully sensible of its lack of sleeping-accommodations. One by one they sank overcome by slumber, some nodding in their chairs, some propping themselves against the wall, while others wrapped themselves in their water-proofs and deliberately took to the floor. Miss Harfleur remained sitting at the little pine table, where she had presided over the late repast, gazing absently into the fire and longing for morning, which always seems so far away to the night-watcher. At length, overcome by weariness, she leaned her head upon the table and fell asleep. One hand rested under her chin, while the other still clasped unconsciously the beads she was telling when slumber surprised her silent devotions. The silken net that confined her hair had come untied, and suffered it to fall in rich wavy masses about her neck and shoulders, while one bright tress, escaping altogether from its bindings, swept down and brushed the floor in a rippling stream of gold. Malvern stood with his back to the fire regarding her as a painter would regard some rare work of art. He had seen faces of more dazzling beauty, perhaps, but never one that attracted and interested him so. There seemed to be a perpetual contradiction between the cut and the coloring, the expression and proportions of the features, that more than made up in originality what it may have detracted from the regularity of their beauty. The look of physical weariness, expressed in her whole attitude, added something indescribably touching and pathetic to that air of appealing melancholy which had struck Audley as so irresistibly captivating.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "if this girl were only as rich as old Bloxton's

pug-nosed daughter she'd fill my bill exactly, but a hired singer in a cathedral choir, and a—a—umph!"

He turned away as he made this moral reflection, and in doing so his eyes again encountered the silent stranger who had first attracted his observation while waiting for the train at Mill Creek Junction. The man was standing a little behind Audley, on the other side of the fire-place, and was regarding the lady with such fixed attention that he did not for some time perceive that the eyes of another were fixed upon him. Indignant at what he considered an impertinence, Audley very pointedly placed himself between Miss Harfleur and the stranger, so as effectually to intercept the view of the latter. The action was too significant not to be understood. A deep frown contracted the man's brow for an instant, then, wrapping his cloak about him, he left the room without a word, and Audley saw him no more.

CHAPTER IV.

A TRESS OF HAIR.

A BAD hotel is a good place to cultivate the virtue of early rising, and accordingly the guests at the Indian Queen were all astir by the first gleam of dawn, hurrying their preparations for departure. By eight o'clock the whole caravan was in motion again. The rain had ceased, and a stinging north wind was fast dispersing the shreds of cloud that hung above the horizon. Evidences of the storm were visible all around, in fallen trees and swollen water-courses, but nothing occurred to impede the progress of our travelers until they reached the banks of the Kiokee River, some eight or nine miles from Palmyra, where the way was blocked for several hundred yards by a train of vehicles waiting to be ferried over. As the boat was a small one, and a pole-ferry is not a very expeditious mode of transit under any circumstances, the delay seemed likely to prove a tedious one. Audley, perceiving some soldiers in the act of kindling a fire on the opposite bank, behind the shelter of a cedar thicket proposed to Miss Harfleur that they should cross over and wait for Uncle Grief's wagon on the other side. The lady assenting, he sprang to the ground and motioned the ferryman to wait. Miss Harfleur, active and graceful as she was, found it no easy matter to descend from their cumbersome equipage. She had to climb over the body of the wagon, and, placing her foot on the rim of the wheel, descend with Malvern's assistance to the ground; but before she could reach him her hand, the mules, startled by the movement of the vehicles in front as they rolled successively forward to fill the gap left by the descent of the two foremost into the ferry-boat, gave the wagon a sudden jerk and precipitated her to the ground. She fell with her head between the wheels, in such a position that a hair's turn must inevitably crush it. Audley could not extricate her in time, but he thrust his arm between the spokes of the wheel as if by main force to stay its revolution. Fortunately, at the same instant two men standing by the roadside flung themselves in front of the animals and stopped their progress just in time to save Miss Harfleur's life. So narrow was her escape that her hair had been caught under the wheel, and one of her curls actually ground off by the rasping of the iron tire against the flinty pebbles with which the road was strewn. Audley raised her from the ground as he would have lifted the dead, and seated her half fainting on a piece of timber that lay by the roadside.

"Are you hurt? Are you seriously hurt, Miss Harfleur?" he inquired, anxiously, wiping the dust from her face with his handkerchief, while their companions crowded round with offers of assistance.

"No," she answered, slowly recovering herself, "not seriously hurt, I believe; but you are," she added, suddenly changing countenance, as she looked into his face and saw there an expression of pain which he could not disguise. The wheel into which he had thrust his arm had, in turning, crushed it like an egg-shell, fracturing the bone in two places, and dislocating the shoulder.

There were, fortunately, two army surgeons in the company, and Miss Harfleur's former association with the Sisters of Charity, in their ministrations at the New Orleans hospitals, rendered her a useful auxiliary in the work of binding a broken limb. In the course of an hour the fractures were set and bandaged, and Audley had the satisfaction of hearing that, with proper care, his arm would be all right in time, though many

weeks must elapse before he would be fit for active service.

During all this time the golden tress that had been so rudely severed from Miss Harfleur's head lay in the road unobserved. Audley was the first to perceive it, as he turned to get into the wagon again, and he stooped and picked it up. He looked at it admiringly, made a step towards Ruth, then hesitated, ran his fingers caressingly through the silken meshes, and then—detestable thief that he was!—quietly hid it away in his pocket.

The rest of the journey to Medway was accomplished without any incident worth recording, and on the afternoon of the third day our travelers found themselves comfortably lodged in the beautiful city that forms the northern terminus of the S. A. & G. C. R. R.,—which, being interpreted, means the South Ambury and Gulf Coast Railroad; so called, no doubt, after the usual fashion of railroad nomenclature, because it does not approach anywhere within a hundred miles of the coast. Here the intimate companions of a brief space went their different ways,—never, perhaps, to meet again, and destined henceforth to be of no more account to one another than if they had never trod a few steps of life's journey together. The Georgia major—whose name, by the way, was Maelstrom—was the only one of their former associates whom Audley and Ruth found on the train next day, when they took passage for South Ambury. He owned a plantation near that place, and had something to do with a Government supply depot established there.

But another person whom they had seen on their journey was aboard the same train, though they knew it not. This person had skulked about the office till he saw Malvern buy tickets for South Ambury, and then quietly took passage in a second-class car for the same place.

CHAPTER V.

MR. CHANCE MAKES A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

A MORE tedious and uninteresting expedition to a stranger cannot well be imagined than the journey by rail to South Ambury. A few miles from its northern terminus the railroad enters that dead flat region known as the "piney woods," which stretches for hundreds of miles over the lowlands of the South Atlantic States, presenting a weary succession of forest and jungle, interspersed with isolated clearings, where the old, dead pines, bleached and blistered by the almost tropical sun of that far Southern region, and twisted by its storms into a thousand fantastic shapes, stretch their wasted arms to heaven, as though the ghosts of the forest giants were still hovering disconsolate over the scene of their destruction.

During the months of November and December the aspect of the piney woods is particularly uninviting. The foliage of their scrubby undergrowth of hickory and black-jack never displays the brilliant hues that adorn the autumnal forests of colder climes, but, withering slowly through the long, scorching summers, gradually parches up and fades into a dingy, lifeless brown. The dead leaves hang upon the trees all winter, giving them a dull, ragged appearance, more melancholy than the naked bleakness of a Northern forest. Even the snowy cotton-fields, through which the railroad cut its way, at times, for miles together, failed to impart an aspect of cheerfulness to the scene, but seemed rather, by their very vastness, to increase the air of loneliness and melancholy that was the prevailing feature of the landscape. The train sped on for hours, over miles and miles of such unvarying monotony that Audley could scarcely realize it was moving at all, and almost fancied that the locomotive itself had become infected by the sluggish languor of the place. Far as the eye could reach, in every direction, stretched the same dull, flat landscape, with its changeless canopy of pines overhead, and its unfailing carpet of wire-grass underfoot. Audley, feverish from his wound, and intolerably weary of the tiresome prospect, was truly rejoiced when, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the train drew up before the substantial red brick depot that marked the southern terminus of the railroad.

South Ambury is a flourishing little town on the north bank of the Petaula River, in the very heart of the piney woods; and the great cotton warehouses that surround the depot, and line its principal thoroughfare, bear ample testimony to its importance as a centre for storing and shipping the great staple. During the fall and winter a general aspect of lintiness pervades the place,

as though a sort of cotton carnival was in progress. Tufts of lint, soiled and ragged, are flying about in every direction, sticking to people's clothes, dodging about under their feet, clinging to the telegraph wires, dancing over the railroad track, and on windy days whirling about in the air like wandering snow-flakes, soiled and travel-stained with the toils of a wearisome journey through an unknown land.

Everybody in South Ambury is connected, in some way, with the cotton business; and although, at the time of which we are writing, it wore something of a military aspect, yet its fine war-trappings did not sit easily upon the honest little trading town, whose air of commonplace prosperity would obtrude itself amid them all, like the homespun breeches of a rustic militia-man under his laced coat and cocked hat. The great cotton warehouses were now, most of them, converted into supply depots for the army; and the sword had taken the place of the plowshare, and the spear of the pruning-hook, yet the natural spirit of the place lingered about it still, and was so "catching," as the negroes say, that all comers were insensibly affected by it; and while the red fields of Virginia were being plowed with bombs and sown with bones, men might still, sometimes, be heard, in the streets of South Ambury, discussing the price of cotton, or even the value of "niggers."

The region tributary to this happy village, from which it derived its importance, was, at the time to which this story refers, laid off in great plantations, of many thousand acres each, which were in the hands of a few wealthy slaveholders. The division of the country into these vast estates tended to give it that lonely, unpopulated aspect which had impressed Colonel Malvern so unfavorably; for even the largest planters could not pretend to keep the whole of their vast domains under cultivation, and great tracts of wild land lay between the inhabited portions of the different plantations. These unoccupied lands afforded roosting-places for the mean whites, or "crackers," as they are termed in local parlance, who squatted about on the borders of the great estates, and subsisted by petty rogueries and impositions upon their wealthy neighbors, which had been connived at by the slipshod benevolence of the latter, till they came to be regarded by the "crackers" as hereditary prerogatives.

A specimen of this interesting class was standing on the platform at the South Ambury depot when Audley Malvern and Ruth Harfleur descended from the train. He was a tall, slab-sided figure, with a loose, shambling look about the joints, as if they were strung together on old wires that were constantly threatening to give way and let him fall to pieces. His scraggy hair and whiskers might almost have passed for tufts of his native wire-grass, so stiff and scrubby were they, and could scarce be distinguished in color from the murky complexion peculiar to his class,—something between a cake of rancid tallow and the green scum of a stagnant pond. He had propped himself against an upright cotton-bale, with his hands in his breeches-pockets, and his legs in the attitude of the Colossus at Rhodes, spanning the ever-increasing sea of tobacco-spit that lay between his feet. He had been staring vacantly about him, without exhibiting much interest in anything until Miss Harfleur emerged from the ladies' car, when his eyes were suddenly arrested, and a look of the utmost astonishment overspread his blank features. He followed her with his gaze as she walked along the platform until she disappeared with Colonel Malvern behind an angle of the depot building, then, swinging his long body forward and slapping it back against the cotton-bale with an emphatic thump, he gave vent to his feelings in one expressive ejaculation,—

"By Golly!"

And then, drawing a long breath, he delivered himself further,—

"My name ain't Jim Chance ef that thar ain't Nettie Bruen come back to life agin."

As he uttered these words a traveler came out of the second-class car and approached the spot where Mr. Chance was standing. His gait was loose and shambling, and his dress and general appearance so precisely that of an unmitigated Georgia "cracker," that but for those strange, piercing, fiery blue eyes the closest observer would never have recognized in him the mysterious stranger whose furtive attentions to Miss Harfleur's diamond ring had already excited Audley Malvern's suspicion. His voice had the unmistakable "cracker" twang as he addressed Mr. Chance, and his accent and phraseology might have passed for that worthy's own.

"I say, mister," he began, nodding slightly by way of salutation, without

taking his hands out of his pockets, "can yer tell me how fur it might be from here to Saxton's Cross Roads?"

Jim eyed the stranger deliberately, from head to foot, without speaking; then, taking aim at a tuft of lint that lay near him, discharged a squirt of tobacco-juice with such precision as to hit it plumb in the middle, and finally, having performed this feat to his satisfaction, proceeded to answer the traveler's question.

"Waal, I reckon," he began, in a drawling, nasal tone, "as it mought be a little better'n thirty mile."

The stranger next took aim at the cotton lint, but missing fire, pulled out a fresh "chaw," and demanded in what direction from South Ambury Saxton's Cross Roads might be.

"D'rectly so," answered Jim, fetching a sweep with his right hand that included all four points of the compass at once. But the new-comer was apparently at no loss to interpret the gesture, for, pointing directly South, he said,—

"That away, is it? And I 'sposen I'll git thar soonest by follerin' along the river road yonder."

"Waal, I never was thar myself," said Jim, discharging another tobacco bomb, "but I've heerd as old George Bruen's Sandowne place, close by whar I lives, is called about half-way. I'm aimin' to git out home myself to-night, an yer've a mind to come along with me I'll set yer right that fur, an' then mebbe some o' Mr. Bruen's folks can give yer a lift the rest o' the way; his waggin goes down every week to the old Kingsmount place, which it is close by whar you wants tu go ter."

The stranger was silent a moment, as if meditating upon this proposal, and Mr. Chance, remembering that the questions had, as yet, been all on one side, took advantage of the pause to become catechist in his turn, which he did in a delicate way by asking the other what mought be his business at Saxton's Cross Roads.

"I'm a—a goin' to see a sister of mine what lives down that way," replied the stranger. "Mrs. Thompson Smith; maybe you mought be acquainted with her."

Mr. Chance thought he had heerd the name afore, but couldn't say as he knowed the lady, and then inquired if the stranger called himself Smith.

"No; my name it's Roby,—Dick Roby; and yourn?"

"Chance,—Mr. Jeems Chance, fust cousin to Billy Chance, what knocked Alick Crane's eye out last election-day." And having thus given the family honors an airing, he observed, with a glance at the stranger's weather-beaten countenance,—

"Ben a soldierin', hain't yer?"

"No; too old for that," answered Roby, raising his hat to show his gray hairs. "And you?"

"Devil a bit of it," cried Jim, with more emphasis than his lantern jaws seemed capable of expressing. "This here's the rich men's quarrel, and they may do their own fightin'. 'Taint none of my bisness if the d—d niggers does git sot free. Ef things goes as they say they're like to do now, some folks what holds their heads high enough to-day will be brought down to bite the dust afore long, and some other folks as I knows on won't be sorry fur it, neither. I wonder now what the likes o' that fine officer chap yonder 'll do," catching a glimpse of Audley Malvern's gilt trappings, as the light cariole he had selected to convey Miss Harfleur from South Ambury rolled away from the depot, "when the bottom rail comes to be toppermost and the top rail bottommost? Ef the derned niggers does git sot up, them what owns 'em 'll git sot down,—that's one comfort."

"And who might that gallivantin' young officer be," asked Roby, not heeding Mr. Chance's political disquisition, "and the pretty lady with him? Some o' your quality folks, eh?"

"I dunno who he is, nor wot he is," growled Jim, "but for the young lady, ef Nettie Bruen hadn't been dead and in her grave these fifteen year, I'd swear 'twas her, for she's as like as like can be."

"Fifteen years!" cried Roby, with a start; "fifteen!" And for the moment he forgot his acting, if acting it was, and every vestige of the native accent forsook his voice.

"Why, yes; fifteen year, and more," replied Jim, not observing Roby's sudden agitation. "Let's see; she died when Bruen Harfleur was born, that was the summer arter me an' Milly was married, which it will be sixteen year the third week arter Christmas. But come, Mr. Roby, the sun's a gittin' low, an' it's a good long bit from here to Sandowne, so we'd best be a movin' ef yer're a goin' with me."

The proposal required no consideration this time.

"Well, no, Mr. Chance," replied the stranger. "I'm obleeged tu yer fur yer offer, but I don't reckon as I can git on with yer this evenin'; I've jest bethought

me of a little bisniss I've got on hand that'll likely keep me over tell to-morrow evenin'. But I tell you what I'll do, Mr. Chance, ef you're agreeable: I'll inquire the way to your place when I do git off, and turn in with you for the night, and you can set me on my way in the mornin'. And I'll bring a mouthful o' somethin' with me, Mr. Chance, tu make us comfortable."

Mr. Chance's mouth began to water in anticipation, and the new friends parted company for a time, Roby directing his steps with remarkable accuracy for a stranger towards the principal thoroughfare of the town. With a little inquiry, he made his way to the office of the "South Ambury Reporter," where he asked, and readily obtained permission, to look over old files of that interesting publication. He was shown into a large room, piled to the ceiling with rows of musty folios, and there left to prosecute his search at leisure. Taking from his pocket a small and carefully-folded package, he selected from it an old, faded letter, in a sprawling masculine hand, which inclosed a slip of printed matter, apparently a short paragraph cut from a newspaper, and yellow with age, like the letter. After reading this over two or three times, and carefully noting the date of the document that contained it, he ran his eyes hastily over the pile of dusty records till they rested upon a volume of the "Reporter's" immediate predecessor, the "Pioneer," for the year 1841. This publication bore the name of one Julian Harfleur, as editor, and Roby explored its columns with the utmost care, but apparently without lighting upon any item of interest. He observed, however, that several numbers were missing from the file in which he would have been most likely to find what he wanted. Of these he made note, and then arranged the others carefully in order, so that his memorandum might at any future time be easily verified.

He next turned to the file for the year 1849, fifteen years back, and after a long and patient inspection discovered, if not the object of his search, something that surprised and agitated him as no anticipated discovery could have done. It was but a short paragraph,—a marriage or a funeral notice, apparently,—but the paper trembled in his hand as he read it, and his blue eyes flashed with a fierce fire that made them, for the moment, terrible as a madman's. As he crushed the paper in his grasp, and strode angrily to and fro in the dusky room, every trace of the abject servility he had lately worn forsook him, and the true man, proud, bold, defiant, as if newly awakened to a sense of some grievous wrong, shone out from under the rags and misery in which he had clothed himself.

"My God! my God!" he cried, in a frenzied voice, "who would have believed that human treachery could go so far?" And, raising his clinched hands to heaven, he uttered a terrible vow of vengeance.

CHAPTER VI.

SOME SCRAPS OF FAMILY HISTORY.

Early on the following afternoon Dick Roby crossed the Petaula, and set out in the direction that Mr. Chance had taken the day before. His inquiries of that worthy concerning the route were evidently altogether superfluous, for he now kept directly on his way, unembarrassed by the thousand cross-roads and by-paths that cut the piney woods in every direction, and are so bewildering to strangers. He seemed even to know all the short cuts and "turn-outs" that diverged from the main road, pausing at times and looking around as if to refresh his memory, but never once losing his way or retracing his steps.

He walked steadily on for several hours, until, just as night was closing in, he reached the brow of a little knoll, from which, gleaming with the last rays of the setting sun, the clustering roofs of a neighboring plantation village were discernible in the distance. He paused here awhile, and stood gazing wistfully at the blue smoke as it went curling up from the cabin chimneys among the pines. The sturdy strokes of an axe that echoed through the forest, and the musical ring of the swineherd's evening call, mingling with the distant hum of cabin and barnyard, had a sweet rural sound, suggestive of peace and plenty. A tender, pensive expression gradually crept over Roby's stormy countenance, and something like a tear glistened in the corners of the strange, fiery blue eyes. He felt in his pocket for his handkerchief, but in doing so his hand rustled the papers he carried there, when suddenly every sign of gentler feeling vanished from his face, and, dash-

ing the unbidden tears angrily from his cheek, he muttered a curse and turned away into the forest.

He had gone a mile or two in this direction, when the obscure by-path he was following terminated abruptly on the border of a great cypress swamp. It was now so dark that his view of the gloomy landscape around him was very imperfect, and for the first time he seemed at a loss how to proceed. As he stood there listening to the melancholy sighing of the wind in the pines and the lonely song of the whip-poor-will in the brake, his attention was suddenly arrested by the glare of a torch against the tall cypress-shafts and the sound of human voices close at hand.

"Now git along with you, Jeems Buchanan," cried a harsh, nasal voice, that he immediately recognized as belonging to Mr. Jim Chance. "Git along faster, or I'll wallop yer till yer can't set down. I'm tired o' bein' pestered with yer."

While uttering these words, Mr. Chance and his companions, two tallow-faced urchins carrying lightwood torches, and a half-grown girl with a greasy baby in her arms, emerged from the thicket and advanced towards the spot where Roby stood.

"Hulloa thar,—who's that?" cried our friend Jim, starting back uneasily as the torchlight fell upon the motionless figure by the roadside.

"'Taint nobody but me, Mr. Chance," answered Roby, advancing to meet him. "You needn't be oneasy."

"Oh, it's you, is it, Mr. Roby? I'm powerful glad to see yer," answered Jim, drawing a long breath of relief. "I'd meant to 'a stepped up the road a piece and met you this evenin', but I've been busy all day a helpin' at Mr. Bruen's sugar-bilin', and couldn't git off. Here, you Alick Stephens Bonaparte," he continued, addressing one of the tallow-faced urchins, and pointing to a foot-path Roby had not observed before, "run up yonder now, quick, and take Aunt Chloe that bucket o' 'lasses old Mrs. Bruen sent her, and be quick about it. Don't keep me a waitin' here the whole night, all along of a derned free nigger."

Roby turned and looked with peculiar interest at the cabin, half concealed by limes and myrtles, towards which the boy was hastening.

"Aunt Chloe," he repeated, slowly, as if thinking aloud,—"Aunt Chloe—can it be——" Then suddenly recollecting Mr. Chance's presence, he checked himself, without completing the sentence. Jim had heard the exclamation, and interpreted it according to his own feelings.

"Why, yes," he growled, in a surly tone, "Mrs. Bruen ain't got no more cornsideration than to bother me with fetchin' truck to a good-for-nothin' free nigger; and I don't like to make no objection, you see, 'cause ef all folks say be true, it's best not to have her sort for your enemy. Not that I believe in any o' their nonsense about witches and the like," he added, with an air of superiority, but at the same time casting an uneasy glance towards the cabin; "but this I do know, that folks don't live to be as old as Aunt Chloe by no nat'ral means. They say she was a 'oman grown when old Calvert Bruen, which he was the father of Randolph and George, fust took possession o' the Sandowne property, and that must be nigh on to eighty year ago."

"She's a old family servant, I s'pose," said Roby, in a tone of indifference. "Them rich folks sets more store by their own niggers nor they do by poor folk like us."

"Wall, no, thar's the wust of it," said Jim; "she ain't no family servant o' theirn, but a derned free nigger; and yet Mr. Bruen lets her live on his land, as his father did afore him, and takes care on her all the same as if she was one o' his own people. I've heern tell as she used to belong to a family of Southmates, that owned all the property afore the Bruens came into the country, and was high quality people in their day. When old man Southmate died, the children all run through with their money, and went to the dogs as fast as ever they could. The sons drunk theirselves to death, and nobody ever knowed what become o' the daughters more 'n that both on 'em quit the country, and turned out no better 'n they should be. Old Wilfred Southmate, jest afore he died, give Aunt Chloe her freedom, 'long of some service she had done the family. Old Calvert Bruen, he come out from Virginny when Randolph Bruen, that's dead now, was a boy, and bought up the Southmate property. He found Aunt Chloe thar, and he 'lowed her to stay, and his son George, what fell heir to the Sandowne estate, he done the same, an' it's thought by some as she knows more about the secrets o' both families than some folks would like to have told."

Alexander Stephens Bonaparte having returned by this time, Mr. Chance cut

short his reminiscences, and the party resumed their walk. The road, for the next quarter of a mile, lay across a chain of sloughs and lime-sinks connected with the swamp, and the walking was so bad as to leave no leisure for conversation. After this it divided, one path leading round the swamp, the other striking off at right angles, through an old field of dead pines, till it terminated abruptly at Mr. Chance's door,—if such an epithet could be applied to the oblong hole in the wall, screened with a dirty blanket, that gave entrance to the habitation of that useful member of society.

As Roby approached this wretched abode of poverty and ignorance he was painfully impressed with the evidences of slothfulness and neglect that were visible all around it. The chimney, built of mud and sticks, had by dint of frequent conflagrations at the wrong end been reduced to a level considerably below the cabin roof, and the slovenly worm fence, that partially surrounded the hut, had rotted away at one end before the bottom rail was laid at the other. No signs of cultivation, not even a potato-hill or "gubber-patch," were anywhere to be seen, but wood-fern and wire-grass flourished, in rank luxuriance, under the very eaves of the dwelling. Although the cabin was so old that a thick growth of mosses and lichens covered its decaying timbers, it was still in the unfinished condition in which it had been left by Mr. George Bruen's workmen seventeen years before, when, in view of young Chance's approaching marriage, that excellent gentleman undertook to set him up in life by clearing a field on a remote corner of his own estate, and sending a dozen of his best hands to help rear a cabin and put it in such a condition that the young man might easily complete the work himself. But it was against Mr. Chance's principles to work, and though the best of timber lay rotting around him, it had never entered the mind of the unprogressive Jim to reconstruct his chimney or put a door to his cabin. He would turn an honest penny for himself, now and then, by selling to his wealthy neighbors any of their own sheep or cattle he happened to find astray, and had once coolly offered to trade to Mr. Bruen the portion of that gentleman's own estate upon which he had allowed the Chance family to settle. Jim's other active efforts in life were devoted to fishing and hunting, especially "nigger" hunting, at which he was such an adept that his name was a terror to runaways for miles around. His children were brought up to walk in their father's footsteps, and easily fell into habits of dependence on Mr. Bruen's indiscreet beneficence, thinking it quite natural and proper that they should live by a system of recognized pilfering and imposition upon their benefactor, while the field he had cleared for them went back to the unreclaimed wilderness, and their unfinished cabin became every year more of a ruin.

The interior of the hovel corresponded in every respect with its unpromising exterior. A dirty bed in one corner, two wooden chests, three or four split-bottomed chairs, a pine table with a pail of water on it, and a wooden shelf over the fire-place, displaying a small row of crockery in various stages of dilapidation and uncleanliness, completed the inventory of movables, while Mr. Chance's better half, together with their three youngest children, a cat, six kittens, two puppies, and a pig, may be said to have constituted the live-stock of the establishment.

Milly Chance, christened by her parents Millennium, but irreverently called Milly for short by the rest of the world, was a tall, raw-boned woman, in a greasy home-spun dress, with a red gingham neckerchief pinned across her shoulders, and a quantity of shaggy rust-colored hair twisted in a rough coil at the back of her head. She was sitting on a corner of the hearth with a three weeks' old baby at her breast, and a snuff-stick in her mouth, when Roby and his companions entered. The fire-light in the room was so dim that he would have been in danger of stumbling over the puppies, the kittens, and two young Chances, who were heaped together promiscuously on the floor, if the smouldering brands on the hearth had not been opportunely reinforced by the half-consumed torches of Jeems Buchanan Breckinridge and Alexander Stephens Bonaparte.

The first object of Mrs. Chance's solicitude, after exchanging the usual salutations with her guest, was to inquire into the result of the day's foraging. Mr. Chance replied by displaying a bucket of molasses that Mrs. Bruen had given him, and producing from his pockets various little odds and ends, which, as Mrs. Bruen had not given them him, it is fair to suppose Mr. Chance had acquired by his own laudable industry.

"I think they might at least 'a given some bread to eat with it," was Milly's

gracious comment, as she licked her fingers after dipping them into the syrup by way of testing its merit, "*cornsiderin'* as you and four o' the children was thar a helpin' the whole day; but that's the way with your rich folks, they're always a grindin' the noses of the poor—— Drat the brats! Can't yer hold yer jaws thar?"

This tender ejaculation was addressed to the two youngest boys, Buddie and Jeff Davis, who were engaged in a contest for possession of the pig, that seemed likely to end in their executing Solomon's judgment upon it notwithstanding the animal's vigorous protestations. After quieting this disturbance, Mrs. Chance next began to express her surprise that the party had been so late in returning from Mr. Bruen's. "I looked fur you home a hour ago, and the taters is wellnigh spilte waitin' so long," she continued, burrowing with a chunk of light-wood into a pile of ashes that lay heaped in a corner of the great cavernous fire-place.

"Wall, Mil, you see," began Jim, deprecatingly, "we had to come round by the Gap Pond Road to fetch some vittles Mr. Bruen wanted took to old Aunt Chloe, and——"

"He's always pesterin' about them sort o' trash," said Mrs. Chance, with a scornful curl of her lip. "If I was Mr. Bruen, you wouldn't catch me havin' no sich good-for-nothin' tramps on my land. And what's Aunt Chloe, arter all, but a dratted free nigger, and a witch besides, what ought by all rights to be driv out o' the country? And yet, Mr. Roby," she continued, turning to the stranger, "he's had her livin' on his land for mor 'n forty year they say, and he's give her a better house than me and my chillun has got this day."

Roby tried to look shocked at this instance of unrewarded merit. "I should think," he said, evading a direct reply, "from all I've heerd o' this Mr. Bruen, as he mought be rich enough to house a man comfortable and never feel his pockets the lighter for it."

"Rich enough!" cried Milly; "there ain't no end to his money; he's got ten thousand acres in one batch up here at his Sandowne place, and mor 'n five hundred niggers, they say, scattered about on his different plantations, besides the old Kingsmount place, and half his brother Randolph's property, which he holds it in trust for Julian Harfleur's chillun."

The brands that had been thrown into the fire when Roby first entered had died away by this time into smouldering embers, by whose imperfect light Milly Chance could not discern the stormy cloud that shadowed her visitor's face as the name of Julian Harfleur fell from her lips. He quickly subdued his agitation, however, and it was in a tone of cool indifference that he inquired,—

"And who might this Julian Harfleur be? Any kin to them Bruenses what you're a talkin' about?"

"Well, yes, a sort o' kin; you see he married old Randolph Bruen's daughter fur to git the property, and bad enough he must 'a wanted it, too, to 'a took her arter all that happened."

Roby sat silent a moment looking into the fire, and then remarked, with an air of unconcern,—

"You seem to have a sight o' rich folks about these parts; this here Harfleur now, he's got a power o' money, too, hain't he?"

"Lawk, yes, money enough since he come in for a grab at the Bruen property, though I've heern my pa say as he knowed the times when Julian Harfleur wasn't owermuch better off nor the likes o' you and me, though he always did carry hisself that high and scornful, till it looked like the land wasn't big enough to hold him. Old Randolph Bruen's money has done turned his head pretty nigh upside down a'ready: I dunno what he'll do ef t'other brother should leave him any o' hisn, 'less he busts."

This awful culmination to Julian Harfleur's pride seemed not at all to impress Roby, whose only reply to Milly's last remark was the observation,—

"Then Mr. George Bruen ain't got no children o' his own, is he?"

"No, none o' his own; but he's done gone and adopted that good-for-nothin' nevy o' his wife's what's named arter him, and there's nobody but knows he might just as well take his money and fling it behind the fire as give it to him, for thar ain't sich another drunkard and spendthrift in all the country as George Dalton. There ain't no mischief nor deviltry goes on for a hundred mile around but George Dalton's at the bottom o't. They say he broke his old father's heart with his wildness, and Mrs. Bruen, she's like to die of grief at his goings on, but his mother and his uncle, them two can't see no fault in him no matter what he does. It's a pity he do go on so, for he's as pretty a young man as ever I see, and he's always a kind word for the poor, and a king couldn't be no freer with his money. The old folks, they's keen for to

make a match 'twixt him and Julian Harfleur's daughter, but George Dalton never can be like other folks in nothin', and while all the other young chaps in the country is a breakin' their necks arter her, it looks like he don't want to have her."

"Julian Harfleur's daughter,—what's her name?" asked Roby, with an involuntary start.

"Claude, they call her, and well named she is, too, for she's jest sich another scornful piece as her old grandmother was afore her, which old Mrs. Harfleur she wouldn't let my sister Susan come inside o' her gate, all along of Tom Flowers; as if she had any right to be flingin' of stones and her son married to Nettie Bruen! There was some excuse for my sister Susan, too, for Tom Flowers was the most takin'est young man as ever I seed; he used to come to my pa's house of evenin's, an' he'd set an' he'd spit, an' he'd spit an' he'd spit, jest as sociable as if he'd been one o' the family. Any gal might 'a fancied him; but to go and take up with a rank, good-for-nothin' stranger what only got his dues when he went to the gallows——"

"Milly," chimed in the nasal voice of Mr. Chance, "you'd better not be a rakin' up of bygones. I ain't never knowed no good yet come o' talkin' about them things, and the great folks so keen fur to hush em' up."

"I ain't afeard o' none o' your Bruenses, nor your Harfleurses neither," retorted Milly, with a salivary discharge that would have done credit to Tom Flowers himself. "The time's fast a comin' when the likes o' them won't be no better 'n you and me; and for all their high ways there's been that said about them and theirn as they won't find it so easy to hush up when they comes to stand at the bottom o' the ladder."

Roby walked to the table, swallowed a few mouthfuls of water from a greasy calabash gourd that lay beside the bucket, then, resuming his seat, observed,—

"This here young lady you're a talkin' about is a only child, I suppose."

Mrs. Chance shook her head, and looked very mysterious.

"There was three on 'em went by his name," she said, "but it looks like he don't want to own none but Claude, 'cause she's cracked up all over the country for sich a beauty and fine lady. Bruen, poor lad, is crook-backed and lame; and though he has got a bad name for mischievousness and onruliness the country over, 'taint his own pa as should turn agin him. But Julian Harfleur is that proud and set up in his mind he can't abide his own son shouldn't be a credit to him."

"And what's become o' t'other one,—you said there was three? Is he a cripple too?"

"*He!*" answered Mrs. Chance, with a strong emphasis on the pronoun. "T'other one warn't a *he*, 'twas a gal."

"Oh, it's dead, then," said Roby, putting a fresh "chaw tobacco" in his mouth.

"Well, no; 'taint dead neither, as I knows on," replied Milly, "but there's them what thinks it owes no thanks to Julian Harfleur for that. He seemed keen enough to git her out o' the way as soon as ever her ma died, for all he had spoke so fair——"

"Milly," interrupted Jim, a second time, "there's some folks as can hear a long way off, and there's some things as it's no good to talk about when the great folks is keen fur to hush 'em up."

Milly Chance gave a scornful toss of her head, but offered no reply. Roby, whether out of deference to his host, or from a fear of exciting suspicion if he manifested too lively an interest in the family history of the Bruens and Harfleurs, did not return to the subject during his stay beneath Mr. Chance's roof.

The next morning, after receiving very explicit directions as to the route that lay before him, he set out on his journey, accompanied by Jeems Buchanan Breckinridge, who had volunteered to act as his guide through the woods to the main road; but instead of continuing in the direction of Saxton's Cross Roads, he dismissed his guide on the first convenient pretext and turned aside into the by-way that led to Aunt Chloe's cabin.

CHAPTER VII.

GOING HOME.

Mr. Harfleur's plantation was about fifteen miles from South Ambury, and Audley and Ruth, upon setting out from the latter place, had received such unfavorable accounts of a certain Chickassennee Swamp that lay between as determined them not to undertake to com-

plete the journey that evening, but to stop for the night at Sandowne, the residence of Ruth's uncle, George Bruen, which was several miles nearer, and on the hither side of the swamp, that was flooded, and almost impassable at this season.

Ruth had been kept apart from her family so long, and with such persistent determination, that she felt many secret misgivings as to the reception she would meet with at home, and was not sorry of an excuse to put off for another day the return to her father, whom she remembered only with fear and dislike. Audley had observed that in all their intercourse together she had studiously avoided any allusion to her family, and as they drew near their destination her manner betrayed a nervousness and anxiety which she strove in vain to conceal. Clearly, all was not right, though where the wrong lay, or what knowledge she had of it, if any, he could not make out. Naturally, his thoughts reverted to the time when he had first seen her, a little child, consigned by a father's decree to what seemed the very jaws of destruction; and the suspicions that had then presented themselves to his mind recurred again, together with certain not very comfortable reflections upon the position in which he might be placing himself by his instrumentality in introducing to a respectable family one of its members whom the head of the house seemed to have his own reasons for wishing to keep in the background.

But whatever selfishness there may have been about Audley Malvern was merely the result of education, not the prompting of a heart naturally bad; and since chance had placed Ruth Harfleur under his protection, he resolved that she should not be deprived of it until he had placed her safe in the hands of those to whom she had a natural right to look for shelter and support.

Their road, for the first few miles after leaving South Ambury, lay along the banks of the Petaula River, whose waters they saw at intervals gleaming through the masses of foliage that clustered along its borders. Tall bays and magnolias reared their towering heads to heaven, while their feet were wrapped in the white mist that hovered over the stream, whose placid surface glistened like a silver ribbon through a veil of gauze. Fringy cypress, crowned with their tufted sprays of sombre autumn brown, and draped with pendent wreaths of long, gray moss, made a melancholy feature in the landscape; spreading live-oaks, covered from base to summit of their dark green cones with the same sad drapery, bore a rude resemblance to the vaulted arches of some gray old ruin, with ivy peeping through the crevices. To the right there was a gentle swell of the surface upward from the river; and the weary succession of pines was broken at intervals by great fields of cotton, stretching away in their white monotony like the foamy expanse of a wintry sea. Now and then a strain of some wild African chorus would reach the ears of the travelers as they passed a band of laborers returning from their work; then it died away, and no sound was heard save the melancholy sighing of the wind in the pines and the grinding of their own wheels in the sand. They met no one by the way, except here and there a negro teamster with a load of bagging and rope for his master's cotton, or a couple of little black urchins, in a single garment, driving home the cows.

The sun was near setting when Audley and his companion drove out of South Ambury, and the evening breeze from the Gulf blew full in their faces; but its freshness and moisture imparted just sufficient chill to the December weather of that mild climate to give our Northern-born hero a comfortable feeling of warmth as he settled himself among the shawls and blankets that filled the rear of their conveyance, and threw a light afghan over his left shoulder, to ward off the too penetrating air from the river.

Miss Harfleur scarcely uttered a word during the first mile or two of their drive. With a light shawl wrapped round her shoulders, and her veil thrown back from her face, she sat gazing at the monotonous landscape with as much eagerness as if it had been one of the loveliest scenes in nature. It is a singular fact that unprepossessing as these pine-flats appear to strangers, they possess attractions to people born among them that no change of scene or clime can countervail, and the heart of the Swiss wanderer does not turn to his mountains with a more inveterate longing than the South Georgian feels for his native pines. Though a mere child when she left her home, and though fifteen long years of absence had flung their misty veil about the past, yet the strange fascinations of her native forests had never lost their hold upon Ruth Harfleur's heart. Every object that met her eye renewed some dim, hazy impression of former days. She felt like one who suddenly experiences the realization of a

dream, and views with bewildered eyes scenes that have been dimly shadowed before in fleeting visions of the night.

Audley grew weary at length of her continued silence, and began to wonder what the deuce she could find in the solemn panorama before them to engage her attention so closely. He had, perhaps, been a little spoilt by the solicitude she had constantly manifested on his account since the accident at Kiokee River, and as sick men are always inclined to be a little fretful, except when they are bad enough off to get frightened and take a pious turn, he felt half provoked with her for seeming so deeply interested in what was only a bore to him. He opened a book, then closed it again; took up a newspaper, unfolded it, then laid that aside; but failing to attract her attention by any of these manœuvres, he at last spoke to her.

"Really, Miss Harfleur," he began, "I am afraid you are becoming infected with the pervading melancholy of this dismal region. What have you been thinking about these last two miles? Not meditating suicide I hope, though I confess this eternal sighing of the wind in the pines is enough to drive one to something of that sort."

"Don't you like it?" said Ruth, looking up at him with a smile. "I was just thinking it the sweetest music I had ever heard."

Audley listened a moment in silence. They were going very slowly, and the weary grinding of their wheels through the sand did not tend to alter Malvern's views as to the cheerfulness of life in the piney woods.

"As you are so accomplished a musician, Miss Harfleur," he answered, "I suppose I must bow to your judgment, though for myself I am obliged to confess that my taste is not sufficiently cultivated to appreciate what you commend so highly."

"You mean, rather," she replied, correcting him, "that it is not sufficiently natural to appreciate the sounds of nature."

"Perhaps so," said Audley, with a scarcely suppressed yawn; "and you will want to quarrel with me next, I suppose, for not seeing a Paradise in this wilderness of pine and wire-grass. I'm too vicious now to appreciate the beauties of nature, eh?" he added, with a laugh.

"I cannot deny," she answered, "that to me the solemn grandeur of these stern old forests is very impressive. I love them as the Gael loves his barren hills, or the Icelander his rock-bound coast."

"And for the same reason, no doubt," replied Audley, dropping his bantering tone, as he saw that she seemed in no mood for jesting, "you will generally find that the local and national attachments of people are strong in proportion to the distinctive and exceptional features of the objects that surround them. Hence the cosmopolitan instincts of city people, who can find nothing individualizing in their piles of brick and mortar; and hence, also, the enthusiastic affection with which the inhabitants of maritime and mountainous regions regard their homes. The ocean and the mountains are distinctive and impressive features which nothing else can replace. It is the same with your pines, which are, I grant, sufficiently unique and peculiar. But," he continued, cutting short his digression, "I should have thought that your local attachments would have taken root elsewhere during so long an absence."

"So long,—yes," answered Ruth, musingly. "Fifteen years! It is almost enough to make an old woman of one."

"Your own face must be my apology for contradicting you there," said Audley, with a smile. "Why, that way of reckoning would make a Methuselah of me, who have ten years the advantage of you in the race of life, or rather you have ten years the advantage of me, for after turning the corner of twenty-five I don't think any of us are anxious to boast of the steps we have taken beyond. You will find your ideas as to the time when the epithet *old* ought to be applied to people gradually enlarging, Miss Harfleur, as you approach nearer to it yourself. I remember when I cast my first vote, I used to think a man of forty verging upon dotage; but as I approach nearer to that respectable period of life myself I find my ideas growing very liberal, and although I shall be thirty-three the 18th of next March, I don't feel a whit more ready for gray hairs than I did ten years ago." And he shook his beautiful brown curls with an air of triumphant gayety that seemed to defy time itself to alter them.

"But we do not always reckon our age by the actual time we have lived," said Miss Harfleur, sadly. "I have often thought that, even in our limited human experience, a single day may sometimes be as a thousand years."

"You are right," said Audley, impressed by a certain pathos in her man-

ner; "most of us have experienced such moments; but I thought they were reserved for the storm-beaten lives of warriors and worldlings. There are some days in a soldier's life that might count against as many years in the balance-book of time."

"I did not think of mere physical suffering," said Miss Harfleur, "when I spoke of the pain that can lengthen moments into years. It is sorrow of the heart that changes youth to age, and that can invade the cloister as well as the camp."

There was a vein of sentimentality about this convent-bred girl, so different from anything Audley was used to in the fashionable women with whom he had been in the habit of associating, that he was amused at the novelty, and felt at times disposed to banter her, as if she had been a school-girl.

"I should think," he answered, looking into her face with a significant smile, "that Miss Harfleur had inflicted a great deal more of that kind of sorrow than she had ever experienced."

Ruth was not much used to this kind of trifling, and felt half piqued at his levity, at a time when she herself was inclined to be unusually melancholy.

"I see," she said, in a vexed tone, "that you think I don't know what I am talking about, and you are laughing at me. Perhaps," she added, after a moment's pause, "I ought not to expect anything else, for I don't believe you ever experienced a sorrow or a genuine emotion of any kind in all your life."

Audley laughed out. "That is as much as to say that I have either been very fortunate or very heartless," he answered; "which do you mean?"

"Both, and neither," was her reply. "I am not quite sure that it is fortunate never to have suffered, and one may lack what we sentimental people call depth of feeling without being actually heartless."

"Then you believe I have never suffered, because I have no depth of feeling?"

"Not enough to hurt you."

"Do you know," he said, looking into her eyes with a peculiar smile, "that is equivalent to saying I have never loved?"

"I am not sure that love itself could hurt you," she answered, — "such, at least, as you are capable of experiencing."

"That is a harsh judgment, Miss Harfleur. How do you know but I am at this moment the victim of a consuming passion that I dare not tell?"

"Because, if you were, you could not play at love-making so flippantly," she answered, in a tone that made Audley draw back and bite his lip with vexation. This was the first time in his life that his tender fooling had ever been repulsed by a woman, and though at another moment he might have laughed good-naturedly at his own discomfiture, he could not help feeling just now that he would rather the rebuff had come from any other quarter.

"You are severe," he said, assuming a more serious tone, "and yet perhaps not altogether unjust, for I must own that I am either of a singularly unsusceptible nature, or singularly the reverse; for, though I am on the point of falling in love with every pretty woman I meet, I have never quite finished the business, and—fallen in."

"With all your skill in the art of love-making, you confess yourself, then, incapable of experiencing a genuine affection?"

"By no means. Forgive me, Miss Harfleur, for reminding you, since I do so only in self-defense, that in the world of fashion, where my lot has been cast, one meets with few women who are capable of inspiring a deep and noble sentiment; so that, after all, perhaps my seeming unimpressibility may not be altogether my own fault. Men of the world have a great deal to make them hard and cynical, but I do not think we are more shallow or superficial than others. Our feelings are not so easily aroused as those of men whose experiences are more limited; but, when once moved, they are all the more deeply stirred for that. I have no wish to boast, like some old women, of a mighty pre-eminence in grief, but, on the few occasions upon which it has been my lot to suffer, I believe I have felt as deeply as it is possible for the human heart to feel."

He spoke with a gravity and earnestness that surprised his companion, and made her regret her former asperity.

"I did not intend, Colonel Malvern," she began, apologetically, "to insinuate that you were by nature shallow or unfeeling; that would be as ungrateful from me, who owe so much to your kindness, as I hope and believe it would be unjust to you. What I really did mean when I said that I believed you had never experienced a genuine emotion, was not that you were actually incapable of feeling it, but that you had never had occa-

sion. You have that irrepressible gayety of spirit, that backwardness about entering into the serious feelings of others, which belong, it seems to me, to one who has never suffered much."

"Do you think so? Well, perhaps you are right. Shall I tell about the moment of severest suffering I have ever known?"

She looked into his face with an expression of eager interest.

"It was nearly four years ago," he began, "when I looked one night across the snow-covered hills of Virginia and beheld a light in the sky that told me the roof that had sheltered my family for nearly three hundred years was about to be laid in the dust, and those dearer to me than life itself were exposed to perils that I dreaded more for them than the rigors of that stormy winter. Duty held me all the while a captive chained to my post. I could not fly to my mother's rescue; was denied even the dying benediction of a father whose life paid the price of that night's work, and my very dust will be banished from the soil where eight generations of Malverns sleep."

"I did you wrong," said Ruth, penitently; "and yet," she added, sadly, "I cannot help thinking you happy even in your misfortunes, for you at least can grieve without bitterness; you know that your father blessed you in his heart before he died, though you were not there to receive his words. It is better to be bereaved than forsaken,—better a thousand times to have your father's roof burned over your head than his door closed in your face!"

The last words were spoken with a passionate emphasis that startled Malvern. She had, during all her intercourse with him, maintained a uniform and impenetrable reserve with regard to her family, notwithstanding the intimacy that had naturally sprung up between them under the circumstances in which they had been brought together. There is nothing that breaks down conventional barriers and promotes rapid friendships like a long journey. Two people will feel like old friends after a day's journey together, who might have met in crowded drawing-rooms throughout a whole season without exchanging more than a nod or a glance. Moreover, Audley Malvern possessed, in a high degree, that peculiar charm of the well-bred Southerner, which consists in throwing aside every trace of constraint and reserve without once overstepping the sharp but narrow line that divides the most perfect ease of manner from obtrusiveness and familiarity. From the first day of their acquaintance, Miss Harfleur had felt as free and unconstrained in her intercourse with him as though they had known each other for years; only upon one subject she had maintained a rigid and unaccountable reserve.

But Audley could not be more in the dark upon this subject than was the lady herself. The complete and, on her part, involuntary severance of all ties between herself and kindred was a mystery she could not unravel, and a source of painful and bitter reflection to her. She only knew that she had been relentlessly banished from home ever since her mother died, and that for fifteen years the only notice her family had taken of her was to thwart and baffle all her plans. They had cast her off without allowing her the miserable liberty of an outcast,—that of choosing her own career. In the few cold and peremptory letters she had received from her father she was repeatedly urged, commanded even, to take the veil,—a course which she persistently refused to adopt, partly because he commanded it, partly from a natural unwillingness to cut herself off irremediably from the career to which her tastes and ambition pointed, —the lyric stage. She could not attribute this desire on the part of her family to pecuniary embarrassment, for her recollections of home called up only scenes of opulence and luxury; neither could she impute it to religious zeal, for she remembered her father only as a scoffer and contemner of all religion. Feelings of resentment and bitterness gradually took possession of her, till the very thought of home and kindred became a source of pain, and she shrank from all allusion to them as one shrinks from exposing a festering wound. But as she drew near her journey's end the tumult of her emotions became so strong that she could no longer maintain her self-control. She knew that she was returning to her family unbidden, unwished for, perhaps, and as the dreaded hour of meeting drew near her strength gave way utterly, and the swelling emotions of her heart found utterance in the passionate outburst that had so astonished Malvern. A long pause succeeded, which Miss Harfleur was the first to interrupt.

"You are doubtless surprised, perhaps shocked, Colonel Malvern," she said, in an embarrassed tone, keeping her eyes fixed on a wisp of pine straw that she was twisting nervously round her fingers, "at the manner in which I have just spoken,

but if you knew the doubts and fears which agitate my mind at this moment you would not wonder at me. You are aware that I have been a stranger to my family for fifteen years. Of the causes of this long exile I am as ignorant as yourself, nor can I answer as to what reception I may meet with at home. I only know that I am returning now without my father's consent, and I have every reason to fear against his wishes. My departure from New Orleans was so sudden and unexpected that I had no opportunity to give notice of my return, and I have no reason to hope the surprise will be a pleasant one to anybody. I tell you this in order that you may not be taken by surprise if our reception should be unpleasant. Of my father I remember nothing that is pleasant. Uncle Bruen was kind to me once, but has taken no notice of me for many years. I left a baby brother and a little sister, but I do not know if they have ever been taught my name, or even if they are still alive, though my heart has yearned towards them as a mother's. But see," she cried, suddenly raising her eyes with a look of eager recognition, "I begin to know the place now,—we are on Uncle Bruen's plantation. I remember that great lime-sink by the roadside,—there is the path that led round the swamp to Aunt Chloe's cabin,—and see, across that field of old pines, there is the smoke from the chimneys of Sandowne."

Unconsciously she drew closer to his side, as one clings to a friend for protection among strangers; and a feeling of utter desolation came over her as she remembered that here, almost in sight of her father's roof, this chance acquaintance of a few days was the nearest friend she had in the world.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BRUENS.

THE spot from which Miss Harfleur had caught the first glimpse of her uncle's home was the same little knoll already described as the scene of the adventurer Roby's meditations. Colonel Malvern perceived as they approached the house increasing signs of wealth and prosperity. The road had diverged somewhat from the river-bank on entering on Mr. Bruen's estate, and had led for the last two or three miles through an unbroken succession of rich cotton-fields. A bulwark of cotton-bales that might have served for a second defense of New Orleans lay piled around the "gin-house," where the hands were now congregating as they came in from the fields to have their day's work submitted to inspection. Dozens of huge hampers overflowing with their snowy treasure lay scattered over a broad platform in front of the gin-house, where two negro foremen of the plantation were weighing. One of them held a blazing light-wood torch, for it was already dusk, while the other gave out the weight of each basket to a lanky individual seated on a hamper near by, who set it down in a book.

One of those long black whips, familiarly known by the negroes as a "Jim-crack-on," which in those days constituted an overseer's badge of authority, lay across the man's knee, and betokened his position on Mr. Bruen's estate. This awful ensign, however, was but a barren pageant in Mr. Tradwick's hand, since his employer rarely permitted it to be used upon the persons of his dependents. The only case of flogging that had taken place on the plantation for years was that of a luckless darkey whose carelessness had caused the burning of a gin-house, with some five thousand pounds of lint cotton. Mr. Bruen, in his first access of anger, had sworn that he would flay the offender alive, and commenced to cut down a hickory sapling for his diabolical purpose, but had ended by using a wisp of broom-sedge instead. The viceroy by no means approved of this leniency on the part of his government, but as he got his one thousand a year and free quarters all the same, he quietly acquiesced, and made up for the restraints of his hand by the license of his tongue, so that Audley's first impression, judging from some very emphatic utterances of Mr. Tradwick that he overheard as he passed, was that a horribly rigorous system of government was maintained in Mr. George Bruen's dominions.

More inviting sounds were issuing from the stables and barn-yard on the other side of the road, where the plantation stock were assembled for the evening feeding. There was a pleasant tinkle of bells from the "cuppen," and a file of women and children wending their way towards the mansion with pails of milk on their heads made a pretty pastoral picture. A little farther on, at the "Quarter," the scene became more animated. The women had already opened their cabins and kindled blazing light-wood fires, which made their

rude walls glow with a ruddy effulgence that would put to shame the lustres of a royal saloon. Here and there at intervals between the cabins great bonfires were blazing in the open air, and little black urchins, in garments as primitive as fig-leaves, or in the still more simple *déshabillé* of Eden, capered round them, reveling in the light and warmth, producing a general effect very similar to that of certain orthodox pictures of the Infernal Regions, where little sable imps are represented as disporting themselves in the flames. Altogether, it was a very jolly Inferno, and quite upset Audley's previous notions as to the pervading melancholy of the piney woods.

A few hundred yards beyond the "Quarter," a fine broad avenue of willow-oaks and wild olives disclosed the planter's residence. Audley was surprised, as he approached the house, to find nothing corresponding with the indications of wealth he had noticed by the way. Instead of the princely mansion he had expected to see, befitting the master of a lordly domain, he beheld what might have passed for the dilapidated homestead of a country farmer burdened with debts and mortgages. The grounds on either side of the avenue were totally unimproved, and inclosed by a common rail fence, while the gate at the entrance was a cumbersome structure, swagging on the ground at one end, and neither opening nor closing, except at the expense of such efforts of strength as seemed likely to wrench it from the rude wooden pins upon which it turned in lieu of hinges. At the end of the avenue, however, was a magnificent garden, separated from the outer inclosure by a tall hedge of Cape jessamines, and all aglow, even at that season, with roses and camellias. When they alighted at the rickety little wattle gate that gave admittance to this floral paradise, Audley observed that the house, which was almost concealed by the shrubbery, was nothing but a long, low log cabin, or, rather, succession of cabins, joined together by piazzas and open corridors, and covering ground enough to contain a respectable village. A group of gentlemen were assembled on the front piazza smoking, and as the noise of their carriage-wheels died away Audley heard a sonorous masculine voice issuing orders to the following effect:

"Halloo there, you Cæsar, Jim, Pompey, run, you scoundrel, to Mr. Tradwick and tell him to take Long Dick and Big Henry and twenty of his stoutest hands and put up a cabin, quick, behind your Mass' George's room. Here comes Mr. Stockdale's carriage up the avenue, and we must have a place for them to sleep: and tell old Aby and Kitty, and some of the people back there, to come and take the ladies' things. Run, you rascal, quick, or I'll blow your brains out!"

Having delivered this gentle admonition, the speaker came striding down the front walk followed by a troop of darkeys, big and little, jostling and stumbling over one another in their eagerness to receive the guests and take care of their bundles.

"It is Uncle Bruen himself," said Ruth, glancing at the approaching figure, as Audley assisted her to alight. "Speak to him first, please, and tell him it is I," she added, imploringly, and trembling so violently that she could scarcely stand upon her feet.

The situation had become extremely embarrassing, and for a moment Audley felt half inclined to repent his Quixotism in having so rashly placed himself in a position that seemed likely to bring him into most embarrassing relations with people who were entire strangers to him. But a pretty face is a wonderful incentive to chivalry, and, besides, it was too late to retreat at this advanced stage of affairs even if he had desired. "At all events I'm in for it now," he said to himself, with the desperate resignation of a man who feels that he has got into an inextricable scrape; and, drawing Ruth's arm protectingly through his own, he advanced boldly towards the house.

By the light of a flaring torch, held aloft by one of Mr. Bruen's sable escort, Audley could discern distinctly the remarkable figure presented by their host as he advanced towards them. He was a tall, portly old gentleman, with thin gray hair, and a countenance expressive of more seriousness and gravity than usually accompanies such rotundity of figure. His dress was shabby to the verge of meanness, and exhibited the most absurd incongruities of detail. His feet were incased in a pair of gayly embroidered bedroom slippers, and the great white linen collar, that enveloped his chin and neck up to the ears, created an odd impression, at first glance, that the old gentleman had somehow got his shirt on wrong end uppermost. This collar was scrupulously neat and starchy, as though it were the one point on which the wearer was disposed to be foppish; but his coat, which reached nearly to the heels, was

faded and threadbare; and the battered old felt hat he had clapped upon his head on coming out of the house had a rowdyish look about it that imparted something grotesquely absurd to his naturally venerable exterior. Audley, who had been bred in a state of society where gentlemen were accustomed to dress in accordance with their means and station, was at a loss to reconcile these beggarly habiliments with the many indications of wealth surrounding the owner of Sandowne, and he immediately settled it in his mind that Uncle Bruen was a stingy old hunks,—a judgment which the old gentleman's hospitable greeting forced him, the next instant, to recant.

"Well, Mr. Stockdale," he cried, in a hearty, friendly tone, advancing to meet his guests, with both hands extended, "this is kind and neighborly, to give us such a pleasant surprise, and you've brought your wife, too,—glad to see you, Mrs. Stockdale, glad to see——"

He stopped short as the torch-light fell over the jessamine hedge and flashed upon Audley's gilded trappings.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, withdrawing his extended hand and substituting a polite bow; "I mistook you for some of our South Ambury friends,—but come in, come in, we're glad to see you all the same. John, 'tend to the horses there, and have the baggage carried in; and here, Dinah, take the lady's shawl, and tell your missis to have something for them to eat; and, John,—halloo there, you rascal,—be sure to put 'em in the stable with the bay mare, and turn your Mass' George's horse out, for you know he's a vicious brute; and—this way, if you please, Colonel——" stopping short, and glancing at the decorations on Audley's collar.

"Malvern," said the latter, bowing, and with difficulty restraining his laughter at the old gentleman's odd jumbling of pronouns,—"Colonel Malvern, of Virginia; and I trust that I bring an effective letter of recommendation to Mr. Bruen in the person of his charming niece, Miss Harfleur, who has allowed me the privilege of acting as her escort during a long and arduous journey."

While he was speaking Ruth raised her veil and, mustering all her courage, calmly met her uncle's gaze. The old gentleman stood as if stupefied. His round, red cheeks grew suddenly white, even under the ruddy torch-light, and a look of pain, almost of terror, came over his countenance as he gazed upon the beautiful face that seemed to petrify him like a Gorgon's head.

"My God!" he exclaimed, shrinking away like one who had seen a ghost, "it is Nettie Bruen come back from the dead!"

"No; only her daughter, come back from the grave where you had buried her alive," said Ruth, turning coldly from him. She had watched every movement of her uncle's countenance, and fancied she read in its pained expression a confirmation of all her fears as to the reception she was to meet with from her family. She let fall her veil again to conceal the tears of mingled pain and resentment that were starting to her eyes, and turning towards Malvern, who had tried to escape from his uncomfortable position as spectator of a scene by pretending to busy himself with the baggage, was about to request him to hand her back to the vehicle from which she had just alighted, and order herself driven, she hardly knew or cared whither, when she was interrupted by her uncle.

"It's Nettie's temper, too," said the old gentleman, meekly, observing the angry gesture with which she had turned from him; "but come, my child," he added, gently, "don't feel hurt at your old uncle, because you are so like your poor, dead mother that the sight of your pretty face saddens his heart;" then, turning to Malvern, he continued, "Excuse me, Colonel Mal—Mal—Mal——"

"Malvern," said Audley, coming to the rescue of the old gentleman, who had a trick of never getting anybody's name right: "Audley Malvern, of Virginia."

"Ah, yes, Malvern. Excuse me, Colonel Malvin, if in my surprise I forgot to express my thanks for your kindness in taking care of my niece, as well as the pleasure I feel at seeing you; Melbourne is a good old Virginia name, sir, and those who bear it are always welcome to my house."

He led them up a broad, sandy walk, bordered on either side by a hedge of magnificent camellias, whose white blossoms gleamed like stars against their dark background of foliage. A double-leaved door, of rough pine plank, admitted them to a roomy hall, whose unceiled roof, and walls of rude pine logs, seemed to Audley, unaccustomed as he was to the slip-shod grandeur of plantation homes, positively barbarous in the manor-house of a superb estate like Sandowne.

The hall, in spite of its dark, rude walls, was brilliantly lighted by an old-fashioned chandelier that hung from one of the rafters, and by gleams of fire-light from the open doors of two front rooms. From one of these proceeded a hum of voices, as though a large company were assembled there, and Audley observed, as his host paused a moment near the door, in delivering Miss Harfleur to the hands of a respectable colored individual answering to the name of Maum Dilsey, who seemed to have special supervision over the private wants of the ladies of the establishment, that the apartment within presented a picture of comfort, not to say elegance, in its accessories, strangely out of keeping with the rudeness of its architecture. Handsome paintings adorned the rough pine walls, and the rich lace window-curtains and heavy tapestry carpet, though somewhat out of keeping with each other as well as with the general structure of the mansion, gave a cheerful and inviting aspect to the room. A grand piano stood open in one corner; and a tall mirror over the rude pine shelf that served for a mantelpiece reflected the forms of a number of well-dressed ladies, reclining in after-dinner indolence upon the easy-chairs and sofas with which the room was abundantly supplied. A glorious light-wood fire crackled on the hearth, and sent its ruddy beams dancing from floor to ceiling, almost eclipsing the pale lamplight that streamed from two porcelain globes on the piano, pearly and white, like two great mistletoe berries.

Mr. Bruen did not invite his guest into this chamber, but leading him on to the farther end of the hall and thence across a covered piazza to a separate wing or cabin in the rear, opened the door and ushered him into a roomy apartment where several young gentlemen were seated at the upper end of a long dining-table, with glasses and decanters before them. Here the same incongruities prevailed that Audley had observed in other parts of the mansion. The walls of unhewn logs, chinked with mud, were adorned with a splendid mirror, a hunting-scene by Landseer, and two of Ruysdael's landscapes. At one end the joyous light-wood blaze roared up a cavernous mud-and-stick chimney that might have served as a mouth to the Hoosac Tunnel, while at the other its beams were reflected from an elegant buffet glittering with silver and cut-glass.

"You must have something to make you comfortable after your journey, colonel," said the old gentleman, advancing into the dining-room and seizing a Venetian glass decanter in one hand while he placed a hide-bottomed chair with the other. "Here, George," he continued, beckoning to one of the party at the table, "look after our friend Colonel Malplaquet——"

"Why, halloo, Malvern, is that you, old boy?" cried a friendly voice, interrupting the old gentleman; and the person addressed as George rose from his seat and advanced with outstretched hand towards Malvern. He was a tall, fine-looking fellow, with a face that would have been remarkably handsome but for the traces of excessive dissipation that disfigured it. Audley gave a start of surprise as he spoke, then pressed forward with a look of eager recognition.

"What, George Dalton! you here?" he exclaimed, grasping the hand the other had extended to him. "The last time I saw you you had a bullet in your breast that seemed likely to prove your passport into the other world, but I'm glad to see you've given Old Nick the slip this time."

"And the last I heard of you," replied George, laughing, "Uncle Sam was about to put a hempen cravat about your neck; how did you contrive to cheat the gallows."

"I don't know," said Audley, "unless Fortune has prepared better-merited destinies for us, and reserved me for the bullet and you for the gallows. But come, how the devil did you happen to be here in this out-of-the-way place?"

"Oh, I'm on the invalid list, you know," said George, lazily subsiding into his chair again. "I've been stationed at South Ambury for the last twelve months; and as my business is there, why, it follows, you know, as a matter of course, that I never am."

"And how the deuce came you to let them poke you off in a corner like that," said Audley, "where there is no chance of distinction, and no glory to be won?"

"Glory?—humbug," answered George. "I'm done with all that school-boy stuff." He laughed contemptuously as he spoke, but a shade of sadness crept over his handsome features that did not altogether accord with the levity of his tone. "What'll you take?" he added, abruptly, pushing a glass towards Malvern.

"Sherry or Madeira, I don't care which," said Audley. "You know I never was much of a fellow for heavy drinks."

"Madeira the deuce! you sha'n't!" cried George, snatching away the decanter on which Audley had just laid his hand. "You always were a confounded milksop, Audley Malvern; I don't believe you ever were respectably drunk in your life. Come now, make a man of yourself for once, and let's have a rousing time of it. Halloo there, Uncle Aby!"

In answer to this appeal a venerable old darkey with a white head appeared at the door, and stood waiting the young man's pleasure.

"I say, old man," continued George, addressing him, "go bring me two lemons and a bottle of that old cognac your master gets out whenever the impressing officers come for his horses. I'll have you a punch directly," he went on, turning to Audley, "that will make you mellow in spite of yourself."

"You are the same reckless vagabond as ever, George, I see," said Audley, with a touch of sadness in his tone.

George's only reply was to ring out in a lusty bass voice two verses of the old Bacchanalian song:

"He who drinks cold water and goes to bed quite sober,
Falls as the leaves do fall in gloomy, cold October;
But he who drinks good whisky, and goes to bed quite mellow,
Lives as he ought to live, and dies a clever fellow."

"And now for our punch," he said, as the song died away and Uncle Aby reappeared at the door. "Spalding, you were always a great boy on drinks," pushing the bottle towards one of his companions; "fix up something that will make a fellow glorious."

And here, leaving our hero under such hopeful auspices, we must turn our attention for awhile to other personages concerned in this narrative.

CHAPTER IX.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS.

The Bruens were one of the first families in the county. Indeed, so pre-eminently were they the first, that none of the other first families (and it is wonderful how many of them there always are) dared dispute that title with them. Old Calvert Bruen, who had come out from Virginia some half a century before, had brought with him not only the blue blood of an old colonial family, but that much more substantial supporter of aristocratic pretensions, a princely fortune. Of his two sons, Randolph, the elder, had gained some distinction in politics, and, though he neglected his pecuniary interests, had still left his daughter one of the richest heiresses in the State. He was many years older than his half-brother, George, and had now been dead some twenty years or more.

George Bruen, besides his share of his father's estate, had inherited an immense fortune from his maternal grandfather, and the natural increase in the value of his property, together with the good management of his factor, Mr. Stockdale, had swelled his possessions till he was the master of almost fabulous wealth. He had been brought up by his grandfather, and, together with his fortune, had inherited from him a bundle of eccentricities and a habitual absent-mindedness that made him a most original character. This old grandfather, if tradition may be trusted, was himself an arrant old outlaw, and had imbued his *protégé* with a disregard of conventionalities that was, perhaps, to be regretted in one of his elevated social position. His manners were often brusque, and he could utter the most atrocious sentiments as glibly as hypocrites of another kind can talk morality and religion,—and with as little sincerity. His generosity and hospitality were unbounded, and he had gathered around him such a troop of poor relations, dependents, and hangers-on that, though he had no children of his own, a Mormon patriarch could hardly boast so numerous a household. Whatever was friendless, homeless, unfortunate, drifted towards him as naturally as the storm-beaten mariner drifts into port. Of this class were Miss Serena Birdsong and Miss Susan Giffen, two poor little old-maid cousins of his wife's stepmother, who had floated about among their relations until at last they stranded upon George Bruen, and there they stuck. They were meek, inoffensive, apologetic little women, who had a sort of standing love-affair with each other, and always called one another "Birdie" and "Dovey."

Of a very different type was Miss Cassandra Plumb, the housekeeper, a sort of female grenadier, who had been originally taken into the house out of charity, but had ended by making herself indispensable there. Her title to connection

with the Bruen family was that her aunt had married one of old Calvert Bruen's overseers. The man used to beat her, and George Bruen's mother, out of compassion, had taken the poor little orphan and reared her as a sort of upper servant, or vicegerent over the blacks, a position which she still held in the Bruen household, and, though she did tyrannize a little over her employers now and then, she had their interest steadily at heart, and kept many an impertinent intruder at bay, and staved off many an unreasonable imposition.

To enumerate all the poor widows and old maids that had cast the burden of their little affairs upon George Bruen's broad shoulders, all the orphan children he was guardian to, all the poor relations he had to push in the world, the superannuated darkies he had pensioned off, the poor families that were "squatted" over his land, would be a task too tedious to undertake here. But latterly a very onerous connection had been entailed upon him by the *mésalliance* of one of his nephews,—George Dalton's younger brother.

Harry Dalton, while still almost a boy, had married, against the wishes of his family, Mary Norgood, whom he met at a boarding-house during his course at the University. The "landlady's daughter" is a snare common to all collegiate towns, but most young men, though they stumble on the very brink of the matrimonial pitfall, escape at last through the vigilance of friends, or some happy accident which compels them to wait till the wisdom of maturer years reverses the judgment of inexperienced youth. Harry Dalton, unfortunately, was of an obstinate, headstrong nature, and the opposition of his friends served only to fix him in his determination to marry as he pleased. The girl, moreover, was a very pretty girl, with nothing against her but her family,—and who of us, at twenty-one, stops to think of that? Not till after the deed was done did poor Harry realize that, in marrying Mary, he had espoused the entire Norgood family, who, proud of the alliance, stuck to him like leeches through the rest of his short life.

This Norgood pill was a very bitter one to all Harry's friends. They had built high hopes upon him, as well on account of his fine natural abilities as the steadiness and perseverance in which he had shown himself so superior to his elder brother. It was, therefore, a terrible disappointment to see him entangled inextricably with people as deficient in real dignity of character as in the artificial accessories of wealth and station that too often pass current for it in the world.

The Norgoods, on the other hand, were equally disappointed if they had expected to reap any immediate advantage from Mary's *coup de fortune*. The Bruens and Daltons were all hot-headed, impetuous people, and proud as the spirits that fell from heaven. Poor Harry was relentlessly ostracized by all his family except George, whose generous nature would not permit him to desert his brother. Though bitterly deprecating Harry's course, he generously pleaded with his father and uncle in his offending brother's behalf,—but he pleaded in vain. The pride of the old men was inexorable, and they answered his entreaties with curses upon Harry's disobedience and obstinacy.

About this time the great civil war broke out, and Harry, joining the army, was killed in the very first battle, bravely fighting at the head of his company. Too late the pride of the Bruens and Daltons began to relent, and poor Harry found an effectual pleader at last, in the remorse that filled their hearts,—when anger and remorse were alike unavailing. Old Judge Dalton died soon after, heart-broken at Harry's untimely fate and the career of reckless dissipation to which his only surviving son began about this time to abandon himself. George Bruen, whose impetuous, but not implacable temper, had fanned the father's flame, was seized with a fit of remorseful contrition, which, not satisfied with raising a superb monument and dispatching an order to Paris for a full-length portrait, seemed ready to embrace even the Norgoods in its work of expiation. Poor Harry himself was beyond the reach of all atonement, but the repentant uncle sent for his young widow and offered to give her a home and take care of her as long as she lived.

The whole Norgood family followed, magnanimously oblivious of the scornful rebuffs they had met with; nay, so very placable and forgiving were they, that they immediately began to cousin not merely the Daltons and Bruens, but their remotest connections,—such of them, at least, as had any pretensions to wealth or social importance; and Mrs. Thomas Jefferson Norgood, Mary's sister-in-law, in the overflowing exuberance of her affection, taught her children to speak of old Randolph Bruen and his wife, who had been dead and in their graves these twenty years, as "Uncle Randolph" and "Aunt

Lilias," while poor Nettie, their daughter, whose name the children of her own family were never taught to pronounce, was familiarly spoken of by them as "Cousin Net." But old Mr. Bruen and his wife were so remorseful at having quarreled with Harry, that they felt as if they could never make sufficient reparation, and they quietly accepted the Norgoods as a sort of expiatory sacrifice to his manes. Much as they resented the alliance at first, their feelings of contrition towards poor Harry would not suffer them, now, to reject any advances from the people on whose account thep had so cruelly used him, and as the Norgoods never failed to make advances, wherever they found an opening, upon people of wealth and distinction, it certainly could not be laid to their charge if the reconciliation was not rapid and complete. Indeed, so rapidly did they advance on their side, that the paternal Norgood was heard quoting the opinions of "my friend Bruen" scarcely two hours after their first interview, while Mrs. Norgood always spoke of Mrs. Bruen, behind her back, as Margaret, and taught her younger daughters to call her "Aunt Mag."

Mrs. Norgood swooped down upon the Bruens with irresistible determination, and would have mother-in-lawed it over the entire family but for the strenuous resistance of Miss Cassandra Plumb, who kept her off at the point of the bayonet.

Miss Cassandra and Mrs. Norgood had been secretly measuring swords ever since they first set eyes upon each other. There seemed to be a natural antagonism between them, and though they never engaged in open combat, the secret warfare raging between them was constantly breaking out in little spirts of irregular firing, or, to drop our military metaphors and speak plain English, they resorted to the vulgar expedient of "talking at" each other. Mrs. Norgood would hold forth in Miss Cassandra's presence upon the coarseness and insolence of the lower orders, and the unreliability of white servants; to which Miss Cassandra would retort with some bold sarcasm upon the way folks did "what kept boardin'-houses." Mrs. Norgood would revenge herself with some spiteful reflection upon old maids, whereupon Miss Cassandra would speak her mind as "to folks what entrapped young men afore they was hardly growed up, and pushed theirselves where they wasn't wanted." Mrs. Norgood was one of those mothers who look upon marriage as the sole end and aim of every woman's existence, and had so impressed this idea upon her daughters, that Miss Cassandra's sturdy independence of character was an inexplicable riddle to them; and Mary Dalton, with innocent curiosity, one day asked that respectable female how she, being unmarried, and with no apparent chance of ever changing her condition, could be so happy and contented. Miss Cassandra's answer would solve many another knotty question in life, if we would but lay it to heart.

"La, child," she said, looking up with a good-natured smile from the dough she was kneading, "'taint nothin' to be a old maid after you once give up struggling."

Mary Dalton, Harry's widow, was one of those happily-constituted beings who accept whatever good falls to their lot as a matter of course, without a doubt or a question beyond their own enjoyment. She was fond of her relations, and glad to see them so comfortably provided for; not that she was a mercenary schemer,—far from it; she was an amiable little soul, pleased to have her family share her good fortune, and it never entered Mary's simple little brain to expect that what was agreeable to herself might not always be so to other people. She soon became, to do her justice, sincerely attached to her Uncle Bruen, and was highly gratified to think that she had been the means of bringing him in contact with such delightful people as she honestly believed her papa and mamma, her sisters and brothers, her aunts and uncles, and cousins and cousins-in-law, and cousins-in-laws' cousins and sisters and brothers to be. She bore no malice to any one, and had forgotten the objections that were raised against her own marriage the moment they were withdrawn. As to pecuniary considerations, she was as innocent of them as if she had been bred in Utopia. Whatever may have been the designs of her family, Mary was influenced in her marriage with Harry by affection alone, and had never deliberately calculated upon his prospects in life; still, now that she was fairly received by his family, though she entertained no positive designs of leading her relations to sponge on Harry's friends (indeed, poor little Mary had very few positive ideas of any sort in her head), she was not annoyed by the scruples of delicacy that would have affected a woman of different character and breeding in the same situation. She had a general idea that Mr. Bruen was, as her mother told her, "rich as Crocus," and

beyond that she never thought or cared, except to feel that it was very nice to live in Mr. Bruen's house, and have everything she wanted, and associate familiarly with all the grand people she used to hear of in her own home as the radiant divinities of some unattainable Olympus. She was not disposed to be selfish in her enjoyment of the good things that cost her nothing, but, pleased to have her friends made partakers of them, she was forever inviting fresh hordes of cousins to Sandowne, till it seemed to the unlucky Bruens that half the world was peopled with Norgoods. These invitations were always accepted, —indeed, many of the cousins did not wait to be invited at all, for "dear Mary" had become such a favorite since her rise in the world that none of her family could bear to be separated from her long at a time.

Mr. Bruen tried to get rid of the most oppressive of these hangers-on, by using his influence with the Government to procure their appointment to various little sinecures, where they had only to keep out of mischief and draw their pay; but as fast as he could get one into a place another would get out, and so they kept up a perpetual see-saw of ins and outs, that left the poor old gentleman no peace of mind. Mr. Thomas Jefferson Norgood had first been in the Nitre Bureau, then in the Commissary Department, and was at present disposed of in a comfortable railroad agency. James K. Polk and Henry Clay (all Mr. Norgood's sons were named for distinguished men) had been, successively, enrolling officers in the Conscript Department and clerks in the Inspector's Office, and were now waiting for an opportunity to serve their country in some other safe and easy capacity. George Washington Monroe Norgood, one of Mary's cousins, had just been appointed drill-sergeant at the State Camp of Instruction, while Mr. Montmorency Boodle, her brother-in-law, was quietly shelved on a comfortable berth in the civil service; and the paternal Norgood himself, Plato Plantagenet by name, was pensioned off in the county clerk's office at South Ambury. Ill-natured people hinted that Mr. Bruen had reasons of his own for getting this worthy gentleman into an office that would require his close attendance in South Ambury; but Mr. Plato Plantagenet, like all bores by profession, was indefatigable in his calling, and, come what might, would always contrive to dine every Sunday at Sandowne. Now, Mr. Bruen was peculiarly sensitive to bores, and, as a general thing, he had very little compunction about getting rid of them, without regard to their feelings or the requirements of good manners, and his awful behavior in this respect was the theme of innumerable curtain-lectures from his prim and punctilious wife. But Mr. Norgood was not a man to be got rid of on any terms short of actually kicking him out of your house; you might yawn in his face, and fairly knock him down with hints,—Mr. Norgood was impervious alike to signs and innuendoes, and would sit for hours listening to his own platitudes with that air of self-satisfaction which characterizes the first-class bore. Like all social nuisances, he was disposed to make himself very much at home in other people's houses, and would light his pipe in Mrs. Bruen's drawing-room, and help himself to the daily paper before any one else had read it,—an enormity which he contrived to aggravate still further by always reading aloud the very things that nobody wanted to hear. But he was Harry's father-in-law, and poor Harry was dead, and so the good old folks endured him with silent resignation. Take it all in all, there never was a family so afflicted with kin-in-law—out-laws, George irreverently termed them—as these unlucky Bruens, and the worst of it was that, like the locusts of Egypt, there seemed to be no end to their swarms.

As Mr. Bruen had no children of his own, it was long a subject of anxious speculation to the curious what disposition he would make of his property. For a long time the chances of heirship seemed pretty equally divided between his namesake, George Dalton, and his niece, Claude Harfleur, the younger sister of Ruth and grand-daughter of Randolph Bruen; a beautiful girl, to whom he was devotedly attached. George Dalton was the son of his wife's sister, and therefore not related by blood to Mr. Bruen himself, nor had he ever taken any special pains to cultivate the unaccountable fancy the old gentleman had conceived for him from his earliest childhood. He had thwarted his uncle's plans concerning him time and again without ever losing favor, and just at the moment when his excesses and dissipation had reached such a height that everybody was expecting him to be kicked out of the house and disinherited forever, the old gentleman formally adopted him as his heir, and made a will leaving him everything, with the exception of a moderate provision for the

deformed boy, Bruen Harfleur, and a small legacy to Claude. It was thought by some that he hoped to see things made even by the marriage of his two favorites; but if so, he proved a bungling match-maker, and George, with his usual perversity, exhibited an unaccountable indifference to the girl, though she was a beauty and an heiress, independent of her uncle, and half the young men in the country were ready to break their necks for her.

George Dalton was altogether an exceptional character. His father, the Hon. Henry Baron Dalton, had held the highest judicial position in the State during the greater part of his life, and left a name behind of which his descendants might well be proud. Being a man of the strictest integrity, he had never taken advantage of the many opportunities his position afforded of enriching himself at the public expense, and as he had no private fortune, it was with the greatest difficulty that he could sustain the dignity of his position on the meagre salary attached to it. Mr. Bruen, who was sincerely attached to his brother-in-law, offered to set his two boys up in life, and invited George, at the age of eighteen, to take charge of a fine plantation, with the understanding that when he came of age it should be his own; but the young man had a strong predilection for the military profession, and rejected his uncle's offer for a cadetship at West Point, that his father's political influence procured for him. It was here he first met Malvern, and began the friendship that was to last through both their lives.

Though always a little inclined to dissipation, he gave evidence of the highest order of talent, and graduated with distinction in spite of himself. On the breaking out of the civil war, he served through the opening campaign with such success that his friends were predicting for him a most brilliant career, when suddenly, in the midst of these fair promises, he dashed to the ground all the bright hopes built upon him, and, abandoning himself to a career of the most reckless dissipation and debauchery, seemed to have lost not only the generous ambition that once fired him, but all self-respect, all regard for common decency.

About this time his father died, bowed down by the grief and disappointment his two sons had caused him, and George, rejecting offers of promotion that were made him on account of his gallant conduct in a recent battle, where he had been terribly wounded, yielded to the wishes of his anxious mother, and passively allowed himself to be shelved as an invalid on an easy berth at South Ambury.

Mrs. Dalton, who had gone to live with her sister after the death of her husband, was a quiet, prim old lady, whose moral and intellectual creed consisted of three articles: first, she believed in her son George; secondly, she believed in the grandeur and glory of the Delaval family, of which she was a member; and, thirdly, she believed in the inherent superiority of the Carolina aristocracy over all the rest of mankind. She would always contrive to let you know, before you had talked with her ten minutes, that she was a South Carolinian and a Delaval by birth; after which, resting upon her laurels, she would subside into dignified silence. She was happier than most of us in being allowed to remain unshaken in her faith, for George Dalton, whatever may have been his faults, had the grace never to appear intoxicated in his mother's presence.

As for his uncle, the old gentleman had wit enough to appreciate George's extraordinary talents, and affection or obstinacy blinded him to the rest. He was so well pleased, moreover, at having the young man in a position that seemed to favor his pet matrimonial scheme, by bringing the two young people constantly together, that he never stopped to inquire into the sudden change of his nephew's conduct, or the motives for his extraordinary abandonment of a career that seemed to offer such brilliant prospects. He did not even fret himself, as most methodical old men would have done, about George's neglect of his business in South Ambury, but rather winked at his frequent absences, and encouraged him in his practice of filling the house with a lot of rollicking young officers, whom old George Bruen's rare wines and good cheer easily tempted from the tiresome routine of a garrison town. Indeed, the generous hospitality of its owner made Sandowne a favorite resort for all the young people of the neighborhood. Claude Harfleur spent half her time there, and what with the visitors she attracted and the company George brought, what with the various incursions of Norgoods and their connections, to say nothing of numerous other friends of the family who were constantly turning up in every direction and coming to spend a few days or weeks or months at San-

downe, the house was kept in a perpetual uproar, and Audley Malvern had not stumbled upon a state dinner-party, or other extraordinary gathering, as he at first supposed, but upon the Bruen household in its normal state.

CHAPTER X.

THE CREDIT OF THE FAMILY IS IN DANGER.

Mr. Bruen having satisfactorily disposed of his guest, as already related, returned to his niece, and remained some time in close conversation with her. After the lapse of about an hour he came out of the room with a very disturbed countenance and began to call for his wife. Whenever Mr. Bruen was much disturbed about anything two peculiarities of his always asserted themselves: namely, his dependence on his wife, and a certain bad habit of profane swearing, which he had acquired from that old pagan ancestor to whom his early youth had been confided. The counteracting influence of a pious old darkey, who had been a sort of moral "Dominie Sampson" to him during his boyhood, and the subsequent training of his wife, had so far modified the habit, that he never gave way to it except under strong excitement, and then always tapered off what a euphuist might term his "objectionable phrases" with apologies and professions of amendment, which, let us hope, were not all mere flagstones in that route which the old adage tells us is paved with good resolutions.

Mrs. Bruen was at the "Quarter," looking after some sick negroes, and had heard nothing of the new arrival till her husband, who had gone in search of her, met her in the path as she was returning, and broke the news with the abrupt exclamation,—

"G—d d—n me, Margaret, she's come back!"

Mrs. Bruen looked at him rebukingly, and asked, in a gentle voice, "Who?"

"I beg your pardon; I didn't mean to say it, Margaret," replied the old gentleman, answering the look rather than the query, "and I intend to quit it from this minute, d—n me if I don't; but you can't expect a man to say nothing, Margaret, when she's come back on a sudden like this, and looking so like Nettie you would think it was her ghost! and it'll set all the infernal gossips—may the Lord forgive me for swearing!—to wagging their tongues again."

Mrs. Bruen started.

"Can it be Ruth you mean?" she said, suddenly turning and grasping him by the arm.

"Why, who else should I mean?" he answered, wiping the perspiration from his brow; "come back after all these years, just as I thought this miserable affair was locked up forever, by her own voluntary act, safe in the walls of a convent. I thought, from Julian Harfleur's assurances, that she had fully set her head on being a nun, and that nothing could shake her in that lucky resolution; but I find, on talking it over with her, that, so far from ever having had a notion of that sort, she says she has been kept there all this time against her will, and resents bitterly what she calls her cruel banishment, though the Lord Almight—— I beg your pardon, Margaret, but He does know I never had a thought of making her do anything against her will. I thought it was a lucky thing for the family she had determined to shut herself up so, but, by my soul, I wouldn't 'a crooked my finger to force her against her will. I tell you what, Margaret, I don't understand it at all, and I begin to think you may have been right, after all, in your doubts about Julian."

"I never quite trusted him," said Mrs. Bruen, looking grave, "though he talked so fair, and made such a show of having the child's interest at heart. But we must not judge him hastily; he may have been acting for the best, according to his judgment. We are all liable to err, and I think, my dear, you and I have done so in not looking to this matter sooner ourselves. My conscience has sometimes misgiven me, lest we were not doing by the child exactly as Nettie would have had us do. You know, Mr. Bruen, she loved this one better than all the rest, and her last words were, 'Uncle Bruen, take care of my little Ruth.' We had no right to delegate the trust to another,—especially when the interests of that other, no matter how honorable we believed him, were in conflict with hers. I doubt that sending the child off among strangers was exactly what Nettie would have meant by taking care of her. You remember how the poor little thing took on when we first sent her off. It goes to

my heart now to think of her tears, and you know she always was afraid of Julian."

Mr. Bruen winced a little under these reminiscences.

"We may have been wrong," he said, "but I call on God to witness that I did what I thought best for the child, as well as for the credit of the family. I wanted to keep her in ignorance of that miserable story, and she couldn't have stayed here without learning, sooner or later, what it would darken her life forever to know,—what has darkened the lives of us all. You know I only consented to let her go, at first, as a sort of experiment, with the understanding that she was to return after a time, if she chose. When Julian told me that rigmarole about her unalterable determination to become a nun, I made my mind easy, thinking it the best arrangement for all parties, but I never dreamed that she was forced against her will. By Go—G—goodness, I mean, Margaret, I don't understand it at all, and I haven't told you the strangest part yet."

He drew closer to her, and related something in a low voice as they walked along. Mrs. Bruen's countenance betrayed signs of deep emotion as she listened, but she did not interrupt him in his narrative.

"Are you sure," she asked, in an agitated voice, when he had finished, "that it is the same ring Nettie lost?"

"The very same, by Jove! as sure as I never mean to swear another oath. I had it in my hand; I read the inscription; I saw the wonderful jewel, and you know there is no mistaking that."

"It's the strangest thing I ever heard of," said Mrs. Bruen. "Poor Nettie was always a little superstitious about the loss of that ring: it disappeared so unaccountably; and you know who gave it to her, and what news came soon after. She always looked upon it as a sort of omen."

"It does look as if the cursed thing had a spell on it," said Mr. Bruen. "It was an evil day for Nettie when she first put it on her finger; an evil day for us all; and I fear it bodes no good that we have laid eyes on the ill-gotten jewel again."

"It has come back as mysteriously as it disappeared," said Mrs. Bruen. "You say it fell into Ruth's hands——"

"Precisely as I have told you," said Mr. Bruen, interrupting her; "at least such is her account of it, and the girl don't look as if she would lie; no, no, there's nothing bad in the girl, though she has been brought up by a set of scoundrelly priests. Hang me, now I come to think of it, if there is any mischief out, they are as likely to be at the bottom of it as anybody. Who knows now but they have sent her here to black-mail us?"

"Nonsense, my dear," replied Mrs. Bruen, who had a sound, clear head of her own; "how should they know anything about it themselves? If there's mischief out, in my opinion Julian Harfleur is much more likely to be at the bottom of it than anybody else."

"But, Margaret," persisted the old gentleman, "you can't think he has a hand in her coming back,—he is the last person in the world to wish for that."

"It is not her coming back that I regret now so much as having ever suffered her to be sent away," said Mrs. Bruen, quietly. "It would have been better for her to stay here and grow old with the shame her life perpetuates. If she had never gone away people would have got used to her by this time, and gossip would have died out of its own accord; but now this sudden return, like a resurrection from the dead, will drag the old scandal from its grave, and people will mouth and whisper and pry worse than if it had never been buried."

"If we had known all," said Mr. Bruen, meekly; "but who ever dreamed of her coming back to upset our plans after she had, as we believed, shut herself up of her own free will in a convent. From the way Julian talked I thought the whole business was settled forever. I tell you, Margaret, there has been something wrong from the first, but I can't make it out, I can't make it out;" and he rested the forefinger of his left hand against the left side of his nose,—an attitude peculiar to him when his reflections were at all perturbed,—and walked on for several steps in silence. Mrs. Bruen was the first to speak.

"Shall you ask any explanation of Julian?" she said.

Mr. Bruen hesitated a moment, as if reflecting what to say, then answered, slowly,—

"No; I reckon we had better wait for things to develop themselves. Julian has always acted so well, and we owe so much to his magnanimity, that I can't find it in my heart to suspect him. He may have been mistaken like the rest of us, or some of those crafty priests may have deceived him, but I cannot believe he meant any harm."

Mrs. Bruen pressed her lips together with a significant expression, but offered no comment.

"And the girl herself?" she asked.

"Innocent as a dove," answered Mr. Bruen, unhesitatingly, "and more in the dark than any of us as to where the wrong lies; but I can see she is prejudiced against Julian."

"And does she know,—do you intend to tell her anything?"

"No, no, not yet; she'll find out all too soon, any way; we had better keep her in blessed ignorance as long as we can. I rather like the girl, what little I have seen of her,—she is frank and high-toned, though I fear she has a good deal of temper; but we must be kind to her for Nettie's sake."

"Yes, yes, we must be kind to Nettie's child," said Mrs. Bruen, softly.

They had now reached the door of the room where Ruth was waiting, and Mrs. Bruen paused with her hand on the latch.

"Have you told Claude?" she asked.

"No; I wanted you to see her first," he answered; "but I'll go for Claude now. Poor child! it is a pity this should have happened just as she is blooming into womanhood; but never mind, when she's once safe married to George all will be right; that boy 'll sustain the credit of the family against all odds."

Cheered by this consoling reflection, he hurried away with a lighter step, while Mrs. Bruen heaved a little sigh, and, opening the door, disappeared into her niece's room.

CHAPTER XI.

AUDLEY CONFORMS TO THE CUSTOMS OF THE COUNTRY.

In the mean time, George and his companions, having finished their potations, began to think of returning to the drawing-room, where the rest of the company had assembled for the evening; and Audley, after making some necessary changes in his toilet, underwent one of those wholesale presentations to a lot of people whose names and faces he could no more remember than he could repeat in order all the words in Webster's Dictionary. As for himself, the appearance of a handsome and elegant stranger in a room full of women never fails to make an impression, and if Audley had been a bashful man, or one at all dubious of his personal advantages, he might well have quailed before the volley of bright glances directed towards him.

The Norgoods were out in full force, but luckily the veteran, Plato Plantagenet, had just button-holed the parson of the parish for a theological disquisition, while his energetic spouse had taken in tow an eligible widower with a view to one of her daughters, so that Audley escaped their clutches for the present, and fell into the gentler hands of George Dalton's mother, who was doing the honors of the house during the temporary absence of her sister from the drawing-room. She was a prim, stately old lady, solemn and grand as the Pyramid of Gizeh or the snow-clad summits of Mont Blanc, and her stiff white frills and ruffles appeared scarcely less frigid and unapproachable. She received Audley, however, with the gracious consideration due to a friend of "my son George."

"Just from the front, I see, colonel," she said, glancing at his bandaged arm, —*prima facie* evidence, in those days, that a man was, if not the hero of a hundred battles, at least one of the hundred heroes of a battle.

"No," he replied. "I have, on the contrary, passed the last two years in most inglorious seclusion. I am but just released from a long imprisonment, and have been spending the first few days of freedom with my mother and sisters, near Charleston."

"Charleston?" repeated Mrs. Dalton, with an air of increasing respect; "then you are a Carolinian?"

"No, I am a Virginian," replied Malvern, with emphasis; "but my family have been living in Carolina since the war."

"Oh, a Virginian," returned Mrs. Dalton, deprecatingly. "Well, there are some very nice people in Virginia. I remember, now, Malvern is a Virginia name. I have often heard my son speak of the family. You were traveling with him, I believe, when the war broke out?"

"Yes; we went over Europe together, and were messmates at West Point besides; indeed, George and I have always been to each other as brothers." He stopped short, and an uneasy expression came into his face as he pronounced the last word.

Mrs. Dalton's attention was now claimed by some of the other guests, and Audley had leisure to attend to his left-hand neighbor, a pretty little black-eyed wo-

man, in widow's weeds, to whom he had been presented on his first entrance; but, as he had not heard her name, nor been initiated, as yet, into all the ramifications of the Bruen and Dalton connection, he did not suspect what the reader has probably guessed already, that this demure little widow was no other than George's sister-in-law, Mary Dalton. Mary's widowhood was not of the severely unapproachable type, but rather of the tender, melancholy, confiding sort, which does not repel any of the gentle consolations that sympathetic natures may feel inclined to bestow. Smiling blandly as Audley turned towards her, she opened the conversation by asking, with an air of bewitching solicitude, if his wound was very painful.

"No wound can be painful to me," he replied, gallantly, "that was received in the service of a lady."

"A lady! Dear me, and what could a lady have to do with anything so dreadful?" asked Mary, opening wide her black eyes.

Audley explained briefly, and without mentioning names, the circumstances of the accident that had come so near costing Miss Harfleur her life.

"Dear me, how very dreadful!" said Mary, when he had finished. "And was the lady very pretty?" with a sly glance at the mirror over the mantel-piece.

"I thought so until to-night," replied Audley, fixing his eyes deliberately upon the widow's face. He had observed the glance at the mirror, and guessed exactly how far he might go.

Mary blushed and dropped her eyes.

"You men do say such naughty things," she answered.

"And yet we dare not always say the half we feel," he replied, without removing his eyes from her face.

"Now, Colonel Malvern, you ought to be ashamed of yourself to talk to me so," said Mary, glancing down at her weeds; and in her agitation she disarranged the folds of her black dress so as to display the tips of two of the prettiest little slippers in the world.

This promising flirtation was nipped in the bud by the entrance of Mrs. Bruen, in company with a young lady whose appearance so fascinated Audley's attention that the widow's little manœuvre was entirely lost upon him. She was a soft, voluptuous brunette, richly dressed, and round, rosy, and luscious as a ripe peach. A greater contrast to the classic, *spirituelle* style he had so much admired in Ruth could hardly be imagined; and yet, this sparkling, gushing, showy beauty was no other than Ruth's own sister, Claude Harfleur.

As Audley had not yet been presented to his hostess, he left the widow's side to go through with that necessary formality, and then, in accordance with the established laws of nature, by which all the men in a room necessarily gravitate towards the prettiest woman there, he found himself one of the little circle of adorers that had gathered round Claude Harfleur.

There was something about Audley, either his *distingué* air, his handsome face, his captivating manners, or all combined, that seemed to be irresistible with women, among whom Claude Harfleur was no exception in the favor with which she regarded him. He was received with such marked preference that the rival claimants for her notice dropped away, one by one, leaving him master of the situation.

"You cannot imagine, Miss Harfleur," he began, placing himself at her side, "what a pleasure it is for a man who has been condemned to the society of his own sex almost exclusively for two years to find himself among ladies once more. It is like emerging from Central Africa or Southern Patagonia into the regions of civilization."

"I am glad to hear you say so," she replied, with a smile, "or I might have suspected that you had been corrupted by the example of your friend. George Dalton never notices any but old women, and he acts as if he thought the whole sex an intolerable bore."

"Ha," thought Audley, unversed as he was in the genealogies of the families represented at Sandowne, "this is what I call free and easy, calling a fellow by his Christian name like that. I don't wonder George is disposed to shy off." Then he said aloud, with a polite bow, "Miss Harfleur, I am sure, could convert him from that opinion if she chose."

"I?" cried Claude, breaking into a little silvery laugh. "Why, he has as good as rejected me already."

Audley gave her a look of mock commiseration.

"Yes," she continued, laughing, "Uncle Bruen has been trying to make a match between George and me ever since I was born, and the wretch absolutely won't have me!"

"Can't you allow him to choose a substitute?"

"No, I shall do that for myself; he don't deserve such grace. In fact, I can't think of a revenge that's black enough to take upon him; can you help me? Suggest something very diabolical."

"The worst I can think of is to let him have his own way, and marry somebody else."

"I am not sure George would mind that at all. At least, I am sure he would not if he could make his own choice in regard to the somebody else, for do you know," she continued, lowering her voice and speaking more seriously, "I suspect that George has long been deeply and hopelessly in love! You have really known him longer than I, for I believe you were friends in your boyhood, and I have often heard him speak of you as one who shared his confidence in a greater degree than any other living being; you, therefore, can tell, no doubt, if my surmise is correct, that George has met with some disappointment which he never has and never will get over."

Audley was strangely disconcerted by this appeal. His brow suddenly clouded, and his manner betrayed evident signs of embarrassment, but he retained his self-possession, and playfully eluded a direct reply.

"I think it very likely your surmise is correct," he said, looking into Claude's face with a significant smile, "but pardon me if I express a suspicion that you are much better informed than I as to the state of George's affections."

"Then you cherish a suspicion that does great injustice to both George and myself," she answered, in a tone which indicated that she did not like to be bantered on this subject, "and I must beg you to lay aside jesting for awhile and believe me when I tell you that George and I know each other far too well for anything of the sort that you are hinting at, and I am convinced, moreover, that he was passionately and, I fear, hopelessly in love long before he knew me,—that is, before I was old enough to be thought of."

"I would like to know what ladies consider evidence on this point," said Audley, adroitly changing the drift of the conversation. "May I ask upon what you ground your belief in regard to George?"

"Yes, certainly. In the first place, because he has never fallen in love with me," answered Claude, with bewitching audacity.

"A most conclusive argument," cried Audley, laughing, "that settles the question beyond all dispute."

"In the next place," continued Claude, "he has such an indifferent, preoccupied air. He never tries to make himself agreeable in society, and is altogether perfectly odious."

"That is a love symptom I never heard of before," said Audley, "that it makes people odious."

"Except to each other, of course," replied Claude. "They always look as if they thought everybody else a bore, while, in reality, it is they who are a bore to everybody else, like George now. Just look at him, isn't his manner positively atrocious?"

Audley turned his eyes to where George sat, cornered by the eldest Miss Norgood, with a look of resigned endurance on his face so rueful, and yet so comical, that Audley could not forbear laughing.

"And only think," continued Claude, pouting, "I have been begging him for three weeks to ride at the tournament and he won't do it, though he knows he is the best horseman in the county. What a pity you are disabled!" she added, glancing at his bandages; "you should ride and wear my colors if you were well."

"Now you make me regret, for the first time, a wound received in the service of a lady," said Audley; "but it can hardly be a matter of great concern to you, who doubtless have a score of knights eager to carry your colors."

"Oh, yes; there are a dozen or more going to ride for me," said Claude, carelessly, "but I would like to number among my cavaliers one whom George pronounces the most accomplished cavalry officer in the army. George is superb himself on horseback, but whenever I admire his skill, he says, 'Oh, but you just ought to see my friend Malvern.'"

"Unfortunately, a man seldom answers to what his friends think of him," said Malvern, with a smile, "and it is well, perhaps, for my reputation that I cannot submit myself to the ordeal of your criticism; but when does the tournament come off? I may, possibly, be well in time."

"No, you cannot on any account; next Thursday is the day; and, as George says, you are to stay with him till ready for service again. We don't intend that you shall get well for six months to come if we can help it."

"Thank you for your amiable inhumanity," said Audley; "you almost make me wish I could break my other arm."

The friendly dialogue was interrupted here by a general stir in the room as the company began to disperse for the night. Audley, like most persons when introduced all at once to a roomful of strangers, had got the names and faces of the people about him into inextricable confusion, an effect which his previous potations by no means tended to counteract, for no man, of ordinarily temperate habits, could keep pace with an inveterate soaker like George without getting his brain more or less fuddled. He was perplexed, moreover, by a certain freedom of manner prevailing around him, which, to one ignorant of the relationship existing between the various individuals that made up the bulk of the company, did appear, to say the least, a little odd; nor were his ideas at all cleared up when he saw George Dalton, just before leaving the room, coolly imprint a kiss upon the widow's lips, and then proceed to repeat the operation upon Claude. The liquors Audley had taken began to operate powerfully by this time, so that a proceeding which, at any other moment, would have naturally explained itself, seemed now attributable only to the peculiar customs of the country. It was near Christmas, that time of universal unbending. He had always heard, besides, that Georgia society was remarkable for its freedom and absence of constraint, and, accordingly, since he had no insurmountable objections to kissing a pretty woman whenever he got a chance, he determined to follow the sage old proverb, which tells us that in Rome it is best to do as the Romans do. Acting upon this discreet conclusion he kissed the widow behind the door, and, encouraged by the success of the experiment, was making direct for Claude, when he was suddenly hustled out of the room by his friend.

CHAPTER XII.

A BEND SINISTER AND A HALTER.

"WHAT the devil do you mean," cried George Dalton, angrily, when he had got his friend into the hall, "taking liberties like that in a respectable house?"

"Why, what the devil do *you* mean?" replied Audley, shaking George's grasp from his arm. "I wonder if you didn't set me the example?"

"Example? Thunder! And what's to prevent a man from kissing his cousin and his sister-in-law if he chooses?"

"His who? Then I have played the very devil!" Audley was sobered in an instant as a sudden comprehension of the situation flashed upon his mind. "I'll tell you what, George," he continued, grinding his boot-heel upon the floor, "it's that confounded liquor. I always told you that no man could drink with you and maintain his self-respect."

George burst out laughing. "Oho, that's the game, is it?" he cried, leading the way down the hall. "So we've got you christened at last, my boy, and upon my word you've begun right royally; so come along, and let us finish the good work. Halloo there, old Bacchus!" popping his head in at the dining-room door as they passed, "bring half a dozen bottles of champagne and a lot of the governor's best cigars to my room. Get along, you old scoundrel, quick!"

"Look here, George," said Audley, as soon as he could edge in a word, "you may drink yourself to a sot if you please, but the devil another drop do I take with you. What sort of people are you here, any way, and what the mischief is going on in the house? Have I stumbled upon a national exposition or a world's fair?"

"Not exactly," said George, laughing. "We always have a crowd of people here. The old folks like it, and the people that come seem to like it, and so we always contrive, somehow or other, to have the house full."

"We?" said Audley, repeating the pronoun; "you talk as if you were head partner in the concern."

"Oh, I've been adopted, you see," said George, in a comical tone; "and a deuced fine thing it is, Audley, to be adopted. Mr. Bruen is my uncle,—that is, his wife is my aunt, and the old gentleman has taken a deuced fancy to me, because I bear his name and am such a credit to it, you know."

"Oh, then that accounts for it all. I was wondering how the devil you came to be so much at home here, ordering things about as if you were Grand Mogul. But, upon my word, you are in clover, old boy; and there are no rival candidates for adoption to bother you?"

"No," said George, opening the door to a large, comfortable, but not very orderly apartment; "and as I used no arts to gain the position, I use none to keep it. The Harfleur children, I suppose,

would naturally come first in the line of succession; but the governor appreciates merit, you see," he added, laughing; "and besides, Claude is only a girl, while for Bruen, poor little devil, not even an heir presumptive could grudge any advantage he is likely to gain."

"Bruen," repeated Audley; "that's another promising namesake, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied the other, drawing a couple of easy-chairs to the fire; "and appropriately called, too, for he's as bearish a young cub as you'll find any day. Diogenes was a philanthropist to him, and he seems to have singled out his own family, particularly his father and sister, as special objects of aversion. The only beings he was ever known to be civil to are my uncle and his wife and an old black hag they call Aunt Chloe, whom the negroes all dread as a witch."

"There must be a touch of insanity about him," said Audley.

"A touch of satanity," returned the other. "His head's as level as any young chap's in Christendom. However," he added, "there is some excuse for the little bear, too, for his own father treats him like a brute. He was thrown from a carriage when only two years old, and injured so as to deform him horribly, and make him a cripple for life. Julian Harfleur, like a cold-hearted, unnatural monster that he is, seemed after this not only to lose all affection for his son, but to conceive a violent disgust and aversion to him. I believe he actually hates the poor, misshapen creature for being his child, and is ashamed of the deformity he ought to pity. They say Bruen was a beautiful child before the accident, and that Mr. Harfleur, who is the proudest, most ambitious man I ever knew, was so overjoyed at his birth that he was planning schemes of future glory for the boy before he was out of his cradle. But his affection could not outlive his pride, and he seems now to regard the boy as the author of his disappointment, rather than the chief sufferer by it. As soon as it became apparent that his deformity was incurable, Bruen was utterly neglected by his father, and left to be brought up as he might by the negroes. Old Aunt Chloe was the only person that concerned herself much about him, and I don't know what would have become of the poor little devil if my uncle, who is really the tenderest-hearted old chap in existence, had not discovered his forlorn condition, and taken him in hand. He has been so soured by his father's treatment that he is a perfect little savage; and fortunately his cynical tastes incline him much to solitude, for his temper is such that, with all the compassion one may feel for his misfortunes, it is almost impossible to endure him."

"Surely his beautiful sister is kind to him," said Audley, shocked at the story.

"Claude would be, now, I suppose, if he would let her. She was too much of a child when the accident first happened to appreciate the boy's peculiar claims upon her kindness, and she has grown up in the habit of seeing him neglected until she does not realize the atrocity of it."

"You surely don't mean to say that such a magnificent creature is without feeling?" exclaimed Audley,—and the thought of Ruth, even when a little child, the ministering angel of a plague-stricken city, flashed upon his mind.

"No," said George, "I don't think Claude Harfleur has a bad heart, but it is not in human nature to stand her training and not be somewhat spoilt by it. She has been taught to regard herself as the centre round which the little world about her revolves; the pride, the hopes, the ambition of the family, are all centred on her, and she knows it. Being such a beauty and heiress, she has, of course, hosts of admirers,—in fact, she is so much the fashion in this part of the world that no young fellow has received his passport into good society until he has made love to her. She made her *début* in Richmond last winter, and turned the heads of all the Government."

"She is certainly very beautiful," said Malvern, absently, for he could not help thinking how different had been the lot of the two sisters, and it seemed to him that the lonely, neglected life of the one was a reproach to the brilliant career of the other.

"Yes," continued George, ignorant of what was passing in his friend's mind, "that is the universal verdict of those who see her for the first time; but it is not a beauty that grows upon you and twines itself about your heart till—till it plays the very devil with you," said George, getting quite adrift in his little current of sentiment.

"But like the sun, it so dazzles you at the first glance that you are blinded by its radiance," said Audley, with a smile, coming to the rescue.

"Yes; and like the sun, it makes many a fatal stroke."

"It doesn't seem to have hit you yet."

"No," said George, in a lower, sadder tone; "the man who has once loved Julia Malvern carries a charm against the fascinations of every other woman."

"George, my boy," said Audley, becoming serious in his turn, "haven't you got over your foolish fancy for that foolish girl yet?"

"It is not a fancy, Audley, or I might hope to conquer it."

"Let me advise you to try, George," said the other, rising and laying his hand gently on the shoulder of his friend. "You will not mistake my words, George, for we have always been more than friends to each other, and you know there is not a fellow in the world that I would like better for a brother-in-law, but I tell you plainly it's no use. Julia is my sister, and very dear to me, but there is one grave fault in her character to which affection cannot blind me: she is thoroughly eaten up with ambition and worldliness,—you can judge to what extent when I tell you that she has made up her mind to marry old General Bagpipe."

"Bagpipe!" cried George, with a start. "You don't mean to say that you are going to let her sacrifice herself to that lumber-headed old knave,—begging your pardon for making so free with your future brother-in-law."

"I let her!" said Audley, sharply. "You ought to know by experience that a block of adamant is less immovable than Julia Malvern when she once sets her head to do a thing. She has made up her mind to recover the wealth and influence she has lost, and she is one of those women who will unhesitatingly sacrifice everything—even affection—to her ambition. You know what Julia Malvern was born to, and how she prized the power and influence that money gave her; you know her pride, her love of pomp and splendor; you know what her home was, and the luxurious and extravagant tastes with which she was reared; but you do not know the bitter poverty and humiliation to which she has of late years been condemned, nor how her proud spirit revolts against it. Bagpipe, it is true, is an infernal old blockhead, but he can restore to Julia the power, the rank, the fortune she has lost."

"Rank," said George, scornfully, "why, he has only recently set up a great-grandfather; fortune: I am rich enough to buy him out a dozen times over. Look here, Audley," he continued, rising and facing his friend, "I never was much of a fellow to swell and gas about my expectations, and so I never passed for a crack puppy away from home; but do you know," he said, mockingly, "that since old George Bruen has settled matters I am the greatest catch in Georgia,—the acknowledged heir to a cool million? Julia has made a bad speculation, after all," he added, with bitter irony. "I have money enough, you see, to buy out old Bagpipe body and soul; but a woman's heart is cheap at any price; too cheap, when it can be bought for money, to be worth the having. I once cherished a faint hope that Julia and I might one day be reconciled; but now she is lost to me, forever,—more lost than if she were dead." And he rose from his seat, and leaned his head on the mantel-piece, while his whole frame shook with emotion.

Audley colored slightly, but the undisguised anguish of his friend disarmed resentment.

"You are right, George," he said, a little haughtily; "your wealth now but increases the barrier your mutual poverty placed between you at the time Julia broke with you. The present state of affairs renders all chance of a reconciliation impossible: the pride and self-respect of both parties alike forbid it; and yet," he added, touched by the uncontrollable emotion of his friend, "if it will give you any comfort to know it, I believe Julia has always loved you, and always will."

"No," said George, sternly, raising his head and looking his friend in the face. "It gives me no comfort to hear anything that lowers Julia Malvern in my eyes. If she had loved me as I loved her, as I once, like a fool, believed that she loved me, no earthly power could have raised a barrier strong enough to part us two. As for her poverty, I only loved her the better when I saw her stricken under the hand of fortune. I had no rank nor influence to offer then; I was only a simple lieutenant, with such chances of promotion as Fortune might give, but I never stopped to think of that: what I had, my heart, my hand, my life, it was all Julia's. I had come under her spell, and, fool that I was, I believed that she loved me purely, unselfishly, heroically, as such a woman can and ought to love. When I heard of the calamities that had overwhelmed your family I never stopped to think of prudential considerations, but hastened at once to her side, and urged her to consummate our engagement on

the spot. I had nothing but my love, my life's devotion, to offer,—for I never stooped to speak to her of expectations,—but these, by God's help, should have shielded and blessed her life as no man's gold can ever do. I felt it in me then to be a new man; I loathed my old habits of dissipation, and with such a motive to guide me as her happiness, such a treasure to reward me as her love, I felt my heart ready for great things; Julia could have made of me what she would. But what did she do? Met my passionate devotion with cold considerations of worldly prudence; talked about our mutual poverty, and said we had better wait till I could make a start in the world,—and a lot of stuff like that. Was it any wonder I left her in a rage? Was it any wonder that, aimless and purposeless, my only hope in life destroyed, I should have become the worthless vagabond I am? And now, to hear that she is about to sell herself for gold to an infamous old profligate whom I wouldn't have thought fit to brush the very dust from her feet! Perhaps she would have done the same to me had she known that I would one day be George Bruen's heir; but a love that can be bought and sold,—I can get that anywhere."

It was well he paused, for there was that in Malvern's face which told him he was going too far.

"Don't mind me, Audley," he said, observing his friend's clouded brow. "You know a fellow in my fix is always a fool, and hardly accountable for his words." Then, after another pause, he asked, abruptly, "Who is it says, 'The love of money is the root of all evil'?"

"I forget," said Audley, reflectively, "whether it was Plato or Aristotle; I've not paid much attention to the classics since I quit school. But I tell you what, George," he continued, feeling that their conversation had touched upon a delicate subject, and seizing the opportunity to change it, "the want of money is at the root of a deuced sight more evils than the love of it. You don't know what a lucky dog you are, to be so well provided with the one thing needful; it's no fun, I can tell you, to be utterly smashed."

"Well, I'll put you in a fair way to repair your own ruined fortunes, if you share your sister's views on the subject, and get the prettiest wife in the country besides," said George, with forced levity. "There's Claude Harfleur, heiress in her own right to half old Randolph Bruen's fortune, which he had the wit to settle by will on his grandchildren,—a solid two hundred thousand. By Jove, Audley, you wouldn't make a bad thing of it now, I can tell you; you always were the very devil of a fellow with women, and I'll bet on your winning if you've a mind to pitch in. But here comes Uncle Aby at last with the soul-refreshing draught. The dickens, old man, what made you hurry yourself so? You haven't kept us waiting but six hours and a half, upon my word. Here, put that table between these two chairs, with a couple of glasses and some cigars, and throw on another stick of light-wood, and put that writing-desk out of the way, and don't forget to send Mercer to me when you go. There, that'll do; now you may take a pull at that bottle on the mantelpiece if you like, and drink to your better speed next time."

Old Aby took one long, lusty pull at the bottle, then stood smacking his lips, as he held it up in the lamp-light to see how much remained within.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" said George, pretending not to read his desire for a deeper potation.

"Please, sir, Massa George," replied the old man, with a bow, an elaborate ceremony with him, which he always performed by catching the topmost lock of his wool with his right hand and kicking his left foot out behind as he dipped his head forward,—"I ain't drink to ole massa yet."

"Well, give him a good tug, and then be off with you."

Uncle Aby took another pull, but still held the bottle as though loath to part with lt.

"Please, sir, Massa George," he began at length, with his usual dab of the head forward and kick of the foot backward. "it goes agin my 'ligion for stop afore I drink the health o' our great soldiers in Virginny, General Lee, and Jeff Davis, and Massa Lincoln."

"You impudent old scoundrel," cried George, with a laugh,—"to talk treason under my very nose! Off with you, and drain the bottle to the Pope, the Turk, and the Devil, if you choose."

"What a fellow you are, George," Audley exclaimed, as the door closed upon Uncle Aby's heel as it flew back in performance of the gyration which he never omitted, no matter how hasty his exit. "Is this the way you cotton-kings manage your slaves, encouraging them in habits of intemperance?"

"Encourage them!" exclaimed George. "The deuce a bit of encouragement do

they need in that direction, I can tell you. However, I have no intention of corrupting that youth's morals," he continued, with a laugh, "for I take care never to leave enough in the bottle to hurt him. It is only a little black-mail I pay him and Mercer now and then, to secure my fine wines and French brandy from pillage. By the way," he added, "do you still keep that boy Archie about you that you had when we were in Italy?"

"Yes; he was born in my father's house, and we were brought up together as knight and squire from our earliest childhood. He is the only piece of property I possess now; it is through him that I am entitled to rank as a slave-holder, and I am rather proud of him as the representative of my fortune. The truth is, George," he continued, in a more serious tone, "though he is a great rogue, and a fancy valet is rather an expensive appendage for a man in my circumstances, I can't help feeling a sort of attachment for that black rascal. He has been faithful to me through everything; he followed me to prison, and what is more, he followed me back again; and though he does plunder me considerably on his own hook, he makes up for it in protecting me from the depredations of other gentlemen of his class. What a superb bouquet!" he added, scenting the fragrant libation that George was just then in the act of pouring out.

"Yes, you will find nothing like this in all the country; my uncle imported it years ago, through a special agent in Bordeaux, who was a noted connoisseur in wines. What! you decline in the face of that aroma? You're a worse case than I thought you; well, here are some fine Havanas. And now, old fellow," he continued, as the two settled themselves for a comfortable smoke, "let's hear something about yourself, how the world has gone with you since we parted, and what brought you into this remote corner of it."

"An order from the War Department brought me here," said Audley, dryly, "to fight deserters in the wire-grass country below."

"Fight deserters!" exclaimed George. "What the deuce did they put you on that sort of duty for?"

"Because I am at present incapacitated by my parole for any other. You know I was captured in that confounded guerrilla business that I came so near getting hanged for: and though our friends in blue were finally prevailed upon to spare my precious life, they still persist in regarding my expedition as beyond the pale of legitimate warfare, and so refuse to exchange me. I am now only released on parole not to take arms against the United States flag until duly exchanged, or otherwise relieved from the obligation. I declined for a long time to bind myself by such conditions, and only did so at last in the hope that by repairing in person to headquarters I might stir up negotiations for my exchange. They told me, however, at Richmond, that the job was rather a hopeless one just now, and I am afraid the game of war will be over before I have a chance to try my hand again."

"But, Audley," said George, "take care you don't get into fresh scrapes; is this duty perfectly consistent with your *parole d' honneur?*"

"I hope you don't think I would undertake it if it were not," said Audley, quickly. "My parole says distinctly, 'shall not bear arms or perform any military service against the United States,' and I am not going to bear arms against the United States, but against a lot of scoundrels that the Federal authorities would be as ready to suppress as our own, if they could only get at them. So far as I can learn, these gangs of outlaws are composed of fugitives from conscription, with a few deserters from Yankee outposts, who pillage the country under the name of loyalists when they are in our lines, and under the name of rebels when they are on the other side; they are a sort of Ishmaelites, whose hands are against every man, and every man's hand against them. I don't like the service a bit; it's a nasty, little, picayune business, but I am told that what it lacks in glory it makes up in danger, so I could not honorably decline, though there is neither fame nor promotion to be won. Confound it all!" he continued, rising and flinging the stump of his cigar into the fire, "but for this cursed parole I might be a major-general in six months."

"Well," said George, laughing, "your foes are not so contemptible after all; they have thus far, I believe, got the better of all the regular forces sent against them; and such rifle-shots! By Jove! one of these bushwhackers can hit a mosquito on the wing at a thousand paces; and they are as thick in the swamps, themselves, as mosquitoes. Their very women fight like tigers, and can cuss you out of countenance in ten minutes. However," he continued, "we won't anticipate your discomfiture by so far; you've got

a wounded arm there that'll keep you unfit for duty for a month to come, or two of them, if you like; and in the mean time I shall claim you as my guest, and we will have a jolly good time of it together."

"Thank you," said Audley; "I shall certainly avail myself of your hospitality, as long as my arm can be kept bad enough to satisfy my conscience."

"If that won't answer," said George, "we can contrive to break the other for you. By the way," he added, "how did you come by that wound? You say you haven't been in service for eighteen months."

Audley was glad that the conversation had shifted to a point where he might allude to his acquaintance with Ruth. He felt a delicacy about introducing the subject himself, since George, in all his communications about their family affairs, had made no allusion whatever to Claude's elder sister, nor given any intimation that he was even aware of her existence.

"I would gladly risk my other arm," said Audley, looking down at his bandages, "in the same cause in which this was injured, as I broke it in saving Miss Harfleur's life."

"Saving Claude's life? Why, Audley," roared George, "you must be tight as bricks!—you haven't known her half an hour."

"I don't mean Claude," said Audley, quietly, "but her sister, Ruth."

"Ruth!" cried George, with a start. "What the deuce do you know about her?"

"I know that she is a very beautiful and charming young lady," said Audley, appearing not to notice his friend's excited manner.

"Do you really mean to say that you have met Ruth——"

"Harfleur," said Audley, remarking his hesitation, and completing the name. "I do, and she is the cause of my being here to-night."

"She is not in this house?"

"Yes."

"Thunder! How the devil did it happen, Audley?" cried George, excitedly, to whom his uncle had as yet found no opportunity of communicating the intelligence.

Malvern laid aside the cigar he had just lighted, and gave a detailed history of his first meeting with Miss Harfleur, and of their subsequent acquaintance. George listened very attentively until his friend had finished; then throwing his half-consumed cigar into the fire, and gazing absently after it, he said,—

"And so you really have brought that poor girl here; did you know, Audley, what you were doing?"

"I knew that I was giving assistance and protection to a woman who seemed in need of both," said Audley, quietly.

"Does my uncle know she is here?" asked George.

"Mr. Bruen met us at the gate."

"How did he receive her?"

"Very kindly."

"That's like him; he's a regular old trump," cried George, with a brightening face. "And you say she is handsome?"

"Remarkably so,—and such a voice! Patti is a screech-owl to her. There is not the same fault to be found with her beauty, either, that you find with the other sister's; for, though it does not strike you so forcibly at first, it grows upon you continually. There is nothing commonplace about her: her looks are as much of a riddle to me as her history. You can't, to save your life, make out what her beauty chiefly consists in; and yet her face grows and grows upon you, and haunts your dreams, till I'll be hanged if it wouldn't play the very devil with a fellow, if he looked at it long enough."

"Take care it don't play the devil with you, then, my boy," said George, in a half-serious tone, as he observed the unwonted enthusiasm with which his friend spoke. "You know you always said, Audley, that if you ever did fall honestly in love, you were afraid it would be a bad case with you. I warn you now, in time, for her sake, as well as for your own, not to contemplate Ruth Harfleur's beauty with too partial eyes, for there is a bend sinister and a halter on her escutcheon; and I know the Malverns well enough to feel assured there is not one of you but would trample under foot your own heart, and the heart of the woman who loved you, rather than stain——"

He ceased abruptly as the door opened and his uncle entered the room. It was an unusual hour for the old gentleman to be astir, and Audley, judging from his countenance that he had something of special importance to communicate to his nephew, considerately withdrew to his own apartment, and left the two alone together.

CHAPTER XIII.

QUASIMODO.

AUDLEY slept that night as only a man can sleep who has long been deprived of the luxury of a bed, and it was with the blind instinct of one suddenly roused from heavy slumber that he sprang to his feet next morning, on hearing the sound of a bugle close at hand, and began to feel for his sword. The action restored him to full consciousness, and he remembered with a smile that this rural *reveillé* was calling to their labors not the warlike veterans of a border battle-field, but the peaceful toilers of a Georgia plantation. Audley laid himself down again, with that delicious, drowsy sensation which makes it almost a luxury to be unnecessarily awakened, now and then, just to feel how pleasant it is to go to sleep again. He composed himself for a comfortable morning nap, but, unfortunately, the little world about him did not compose itself at the same time. The *reveillé*, or "morning horn," as the negroes more poetically term it, was the signal for the whole plantation to rouse itself, amid a confusion of noises more distracting to Audley's unaccustomed ear than the roar of a military camp.

The sounding of the bugle was first succeeded by a confused hum of voices, mingled with occasional snatches of song, and loud ya-yas, called forth by ebullitions of African wit, as the negroes issued from their cabins and went about their various tasks. Then came a tramping of heavy, broganed feet around the house, with flashes of torchlight gleaming through crevices in the wall, followed by the sound of the busy axe, and the noisy rattle of the windlass as the old pine bucket made oft-repeated journeys to the bottom of the well. A horrible din from the poultry-yard was mingled with the distant roar of the stables, while above all arose the herdsman's musical call, and the merry song of laborers starting for the cotton-field.

Scarcely had these noises begun to subside, and the early twilight had not yet brightened into the misty gray of morning, when Audley was alarmed by the voice of his host calling so loud and excitedly that he started up in bed, wondering whether the house were on fire, or a body of Yankee raiders had suddenly made their appearance. The old gentleman was an early riser, and had a habit of taking his station every morning on a little back porch behind the dining-room, and issuing thence his orders to the remotest corner of the plantation, while bracing himself with a stout mint-julep. Every darkey that came in sight was hailed and questioned as to where he was going, what he was going to do, who told him to do it, scolded for doing it, then scolded for not doing it, and finally ordered to do something else. This was what Mr. Bruen called attending to his business. As there were great numbers passing about at that busy hour, and as the old gentleman never allowed a single individual, no matter how far off, to escape unchallenged, he had got into the habit of talking very fast, so as to have done with one before another could escape him; and as he generally modulated his voice as if aiming to be heard at the North Pole or on the top of the Himalayas, it is not surprising that Audley Malvern was somewhat startled by his first utterances.

The first person that attracted Mr. Bruen's attention on this particular morning was one of the stable-grooms, whose woolly head was barely visible in the distance above the snowy expanse that formed the remote boundary of a neighboring cotton-field.

"You Jeems, Jeems, Jeems, you scoundrel!" he cried, in a voice that seemed pitched for the antipodes, and adopting from habit something of the grammar and phraseology of those to whom he addressed himself, "take that bay mare to Uncle January's and get her shod before you ride her to South Ambury for the mail, and keep your Mass' George's horse up to-day, and hitch William Tell to the buggy, and tell Long Dick to use old Bec, and Sal, and Sliding Sam, and the blind mule in the gin, and to put them two pair I bought from Joe Thompson t'other day in the sugar-mill, and turn the rest into the new ground by the river. Good-morning, Aunt Viney," lowering his voice as the shuffling steps of an old woman were heard approaching; "how goes it with you this morning?"

"Ah, lud, I ain't much, massa. And how's you do?"

Audley sank back upon his pillow, with a muttered "Confound it! will they never let a fellow sleep here?" And I am afraid he mentally consigned his host to a place not often mentioned in polite society.

A short pause succeeded, during which the old gentleman seemed to be giving

his undivided attention to the julep, then the storm broke out afresh.

"Wally, Wally! Ho there, you d—d scoundrel!" he shouted, in a voice that might have reached New Zealand or Cape Colony.

"Lord 'a mercy on me, how come you to let them hogs break in the potato-patch, you rascal? Them's your missis's best yams, too, in that patch by the horse lot; and I'd rather see you dead and in h—l—may the Lord forgive me!" in a lower tone; "I mean if you was a good Christian, and prepared for it—than to lose them potatoes."

A far-off voice from the antipodes was heard to shout back something in reply, but it was immediately drowned in a roar that might have been intended for some one in Kamtchatka or the Philippine Islands.

"Halloo there! hold on, you; stop, stop, you rascal! Where are you going, John?"

The reply returned from Kamtchatka was too feeble for Audley to catch.

"Why don't you get along with you, then?" broke in the master. "Get along faster, you lazy dog, or I'll help you with my stick; and tell old Setley to turn the milk cows into the pea-field, and to kill one of the crop-eared sow's pigs for dinner. How now, Tradwick?" with a slight change of tone, to reach some one no farther off than Western Europe or the Azores. "Good-morning, Tradwick; where are the hands working today?"

"Mornin', sir, mornin'," replied the officious voice of the overseer. "I reckon they'll finish in the Grinder lot by noon, and then I thought I would turn 'em in the mill field, t'other side o' Gap Pond."

"Cotton pretty good over there?"

"Wall, no; it's raither sorry. The mill field's mos' too close on the bottom lands to make good cotton of a wet season like this. I've a good mind to put it in corn next year."

"How about the river field? Have you finished over there?"

"Yes, licked it clean as ef the catterpillar had been along."

"And how did it yield?"

"Wall, right smart; nigh on to fifty bales, I should say."

This dialogue continued for some half-hour or more, broken with an occasional digression to Nova Zembla or the Sandwich Isles, after which the old gentleman, having finished his julep, subsided for a time, and Audley again composed himself for slumber. He was just beginning to lose consciousness, when a little darkey came in with a light-wood torch, which he stuck into the fire-place, followed by another little darkey with an armful of light-wood knots, which he flung down on a corner of the great clay hearth; and then they both sat down to play in the ashes, till a big darkey entered with a pail of water, drove both the little darkeys out, stuck a fresh pine-knot in the fire, then sat down and went to sleep over it. Before long, another darkey came in with bath-tub and towels, threw on another pine-knot, chunked up his fellow, and the two sat themselves down for a sociable chat. But the friendly conference was suddenly interrupted by Malvern, who, exasperated at last beyond all endurance, pitched a bootjack and two chairs at the disturbers of his peace, and sent the astonished darkeys flying from the room. He was now too thoroughly aroused to think of sleeping any more; and as Mr. Bruen's voice was heard again, just at that moment, issuing orders to some point in Madagascar or the Fejee Islands, Audley concluded to get up and dress in self-defense, though it was long before the breakfast hour at Sandowne.

Having finished his toilet, he sallied forth to amuse himself as best he might, till breakfast-time. On passing through the hall, he was surprised to hear the sound of a piano issuing from the drawing-room. His first thought was of Ruth, —but it could not be she, for the performance was bungling and crude. The door was ajar; he entered softly, but stopped short, surprised and shocked, as his eyes fell upon the unhappy musician. He was a lad of small, delicate frame, and most horribly deformed. The right hip and the left shoulder protruded far beyond their natural places, and the spine curved from side to side, as though some cruel contortion of nature had twisted it into the shape of the letter S. A fine, well-formed head surmounted this distorted trunk, like some stately castle on the brow of a ragged precipice, but as the boy sat with his back to the door, Audley could not judge of the features. A pair of crutches lay on a chair beside him, and a large Newfoundland dog, that crouched at his feet, opened his eyes as Audley entered, welcomed him with a cordial wag of the tail, then dropped quietly to sleep again.

Audley knew at once that this unfortunate creature must be young Bruen

Harfleur, and, in spite of all he had heard concerning the boy's savage temper, his heart found room for no feeling save the most unbounded compassion. He stood near the open door, unperceived by the lad, and watched him in silence until he finished his strain. It was a wild chorus from "Der Freischütz," which he was trying to play by ear. Now and then he would make a false note, and if the first or second effort did not set him right, would strike the keyboard angrily with his fists. At last he came to a passage of such intricacy that he could not manage it at all, so he gave the piano two or three hearty cuffs, and, dropping his hands on his knees, sat gazing at the instrument with a hopeless, dejected air. Audley, moved with compassion, which he yearned to express, took this opportunity of introducing himself to the unfortunate cripple's notice.

"Good-morning, my young friend," he said, in a pleasant voice, drawing near the piano. "You seem to have got into some confusion about your notes; will you allow me to set you right? I happen to be very familiar with that air."

The boy turned his head suddenly, and revealed a face that Audley never forgot. It was exquisitely beautiful in feature and outline, and bore a striking resemblance to Ruth's, in the delicate chiseling and classic regularity of contour; but the coloring was more like Claude's, and the expression was unlike anything Audley had ever before seen.

"I'm none of your friend," he answered, sullenly, as he turned his flashing eyes upon the stranger with a look of angry surprise, "and it's no business of yours whether I play right or wrong."

This was unpromising, but Audley's feelings had been deeply stirred by the boy's miserable story, and he was not to be easily baffled in his efforts at conciliation. He saw that the readiest way to Bruen's heart was through music, and returned perseveringly to the point from which he had been so rudely repulsed. He received the ungracious rebuff with a smile, and answered, good-humoredly,—

"But it's your business, you know, to play correctly if you can. You seem to have a fine talent for music, and would play very well indeed with a little pains; see now, here is the chord you are trying to make,—*c* sharp, now *g*, then *e* flat. There, that'll help set you straight."

The boy cut short his instructions by rudely knocking his hand from the keyboard. "What right have you to talk about setting me straight?" he cried, his pale cheeks suddenly growing crimson and his eyes flashing fire. "I tell you to go about your business and let me alone!" And he shook his fist in Audley's face so fiercely, as almost to betray that gallant officer into an ignominious dodge.

"Upon my word, young Quasimodo, your manners need mending," he said, as he caught the boy's clinched fist gently but firmly in his hand, and removed it from its unbecoming proximity to his own features. Resentment against so pitiable an object was impossible, and Audley had uttered the words in an under-tone, as a sort of private reflection of his own, rather than an intended rebuke to the boy. It never entered his head that this young savage of the piney woods had so much as heard of Victor Hugo, and had he dreamed that this allusion to the unprepossessing hero of *Notre Dame* would be understood, he would have bitten out his tongue rather than make it. As it was, the name Quasimodo had no sooner fallen from his lips than he would have given his right hand to recall it. Bruen did understand, and his face became livid with rage. He stood for a moment glaring at Audley like a young hyena, then suddenly fell upon him, tooth and nail, and, before the latter well knew what he was about, had bitten his arm till the blood rushed out. At that moment a delicate white hand was laid on Bruen's shoulder, and, looking round, the boy's eyes met the eyes of the sister he had never before beheld.

Ruth had left her bed at the first sound of the dressing-bell, and, as she was one of those rare women who possess the art of dressing rapidly, she had completed her toilet long before any of the rest of the family were ready to leave their rooms. She had started out for a walk in the garden, before breakfast, but, hearing music in the parlor, and being informed by one of the servants that her brother was in the habit of going there every morning to play on the piano, she directed her steps thither instead of to the garden, and arrived just in time to witness the extraordinary scene described above. The accident that had crippled Bruen so painfully happened a year or two after her departure from home: she had never been informed of her brother's condition, and the knowledge of it now burst upon her as a horrible surprise that almost took her senses away. She had no idea, until that moment, but that the brother whom she remembered only as a little chubby infant had grown up into a fine, well-

favored lad; and when her eyes first fell upon the poor, misshapen creature, whose natural deformity was rendered more horrible than ever at the moment by the fearful passion that distorted his features, it was as though a thunder-bolt had descended upon her head. She tried to speak, but the one word "Bruen" was all she could utter; her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth, and she stood gazing at her brother with a look of horror and anguish that she tried in vain to conceal. He instantly loosened his hold of Malvern's arm, shook her hand rudely from his shoulder, and turned upon her with the look of a young tiger.

"What business have you got touching me? you red-headed witch!" he cried, fiercely. "What do you want to point at my shoulders for?"

Audley felt like bundling the young whelp out of the window for this rudeness to his sister, but he remembered his own share in raising the storm, and self-reproach made him forbearing.

"Don't notice anything that may escape from that poor boy now, Miss Harfleur," he whispered. "His feelings have just been cruelly wounded through my own indiscretion, and he is scarcely responsible for anything he may say or do."

In a few half-whispered words he related what had occurred between Bruen and himself. Ruth's literary attainments were not very extensive, and she was as much in the dark as to the subject of Audley's unfortunate allusion as he had supposed Bruen would be; but her woman's instinct told her it was something that the boy had construed into a cruel jeer at his personal defects, and, feeling the injustice of such a suspicion against Malvern, she immediately set herself to soothe the boy's feelings, and make peace with him for the young officer, who reproached himself bitterly for his thoughtless words. Forgetting the rude repulse she had received, Ruth approached her brother once more, and laid her hand gently on his arm, which he held doggedly crossed upon the other on his breast.

"Bruen, my brother," she said, softly, while the boy started at her words, and fixed his eyes upon her in a keen, searching gaze, "this gentleman is Colonel Malvern, and you must not be angry at anything he has said, for I am sure he did not mean to hurt your feelings. He has been very kind to me, and that wounded arm of his was hurt in saving my life,—your sister's life, Bruen. I am your sister Ruth, who went away so long ago, when you were a little baby. Have you never heard of me, brother?" she continued, with a faltering voice, her heart sinking under the cold, sullen look with which he regarded her. "Do you know nothing,—do you care nothing about your sister Ruth?"

He kept his eyes fixed upon her a long time without making any reply, then said, abruptly,—

"You are beautiful, like all the rest; I thought you were like me, because they sent you off and hid you. But all who bear our name are beautiful,—all but poor Quasimodo."

The words were uttered in a tone that smote Audley to the heart, while Ruth felt herself drawn towards this poor, misshapen creature as she had never been drawn towards any living being. She said nothing, but stooped and kissed him tenderly.

"Go away; I hate you," was Bruen's only answer to the caress, and he raised his clinched fist, but let it fall again without striking her. Ruth, overcome by this rebuff, covered her face with her hands, and, sinking into a chair, burst into tears. Malvern, feeling that it would be indelicate to remain an idle spectator of this extraordinary scene between the brother and sister, silently withdrew. Bruen turned upon his sister a look of sullen surprise.

"What are you crying for?" he asked, sharply. "You are not crooked nor devilish, and nobody's ashamed of you; what are you crying for?"

"Because I am a miserable outcast," cried Ruth, passionately, "whom even my own brother rejects."

"You an outcast!" he exclaimed. "How can you talk that way, who are straight as an arrow and beautiful as daylight? It's I that am the outcast,—I that nobody loves."

"I will love you, if you will let me," said Ruth, drying her eyes.

"There's nothing about me for anybody to love," said the boy, gloomily. "You only want to pity me, and I don't want your pity."

"But I want yours, if I cannot win your affection."

"You want my pity? You are not lame, nor hunchback, nor devilish; what do you want to be pitied for?"

"Because I am lonely and desolate, and nobody cares for me."

"That big dragooning fellow cares for you; I saw it by the way he looked at

you," said the boy; and he shook his fist menacingly towards the door through which Audley Malvern had disappeared.

A sudden flush overspread Ruth's features. "You don't know what you are saying, Bruen," she answered; and, to hide her confusion. she turned to the piano, and ran her fingers over the keys, then commenced playing a melancholy air from "Faust." The boy's face gradually softened as he listened to the music. By degrees he drew nearer, and, resting his elbows on the piano, stood listening with an expression of rapt enjoyment, till a sound of footsteps in the hall roused him from his trance, and brought the old dogged look into his face again.

"That's always the way," he said, casting an angry glance at the door; "somebody coming to stare,—but stop; they sha'n't hear you play,—come, Toby."

He jerked her hand from the keyboard, and, seizing his crutches, vanished through one of the open windows, followed by his dog. Ruth rose and went after him, the windows opening to the floor; but the boy moved with such amazing rapidity, that he disappeared amid the shrubbery before Ruth had crossed the piazza.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. BRUEN CARRIES HIS POINT.

The rest of the family had assembled in Mrs. Bruen's sitting-room by this time, whiling away, as best they might, that most irritating and uncomfortable portion of daily life, the few minutes that intervene between getting dressed and getting breakfast. To this apartment Ruth was conducted by her uncle, and introduced to his friends. The occasion was a painfully embarrassing one to Ruth, for she saw a look of furtive curiosity in every eye; and, though her uncle did his best to make it appear as though nothing extraordinary had happened, and made forlorn jokes about her being "a little runaway nun," there was a cloud on his brow that he could not dispel, and a perturbation in his manner that he could not wholly conceal. Unlike her younger sister, Ruth had had little experience of society, and her secluded convent life had fostered a reserve of manner which was not calculated to make her way readily among strangers. In all sorts of odd adventures that would embarrass and, perhaps, shock the propriety of conventionally-trained women, she was unusually confident and self-possessed, the strange experiences to which a life of religious knight-errantry had inured her, together with her subsequent brief intercourse with Bohemians of the stage, having made familiar to her phases of existence from which other women of her class would shrink with genteel horror. But in regularly-organized society, to which she was less accustomed, she felt less at ease, and the singular, and to her inexplicable, relation in which she stood to her family rendered the situation an exceedingly trying one, and froze her natural reserve of manner into an iciness that seemed almost ungracious. She had not mixed enough with men to learn the power of beauty, and had not, therefore, that unfailing source of sustaining grace which consciousness of beauty, next to a Paris-made dress, supplies to the feminine mind, and did not give her own face full credit for its share in attracting the wondering glances directed towards her.

She soon forgot her embarrassment, however, and began to stare and wonder in her turn, as her eyes fell upon a picture over the mantel-piece, that instantly riveted her gaze, and rendered her oblivious, for the moment, of every other object. It was a full-length portrait of a young and very beautiful woman, with a profusion of light blonde hair, arranged in a style that bore no distant resemblance to the graceful fabric of puffs and ringlets that surmounted Ruth's own brow. The dress, like the coiffure, was of a style in vogue some quarter of a century back, but towards which the fashions of the period had reverted in such a degree as to give it quite a modern appearance. The most perfect grace and dignity were pictured in every outline of the queenly form, but the beautiful face wore an expression of willfulness and petulance strangely out of keeping with its singular delicacy of coloring and contour. As her eyes fell upon this portrait Ruth felt herself vividly impressed with the idea that she had seen the like of it before. So strangely familiar was the face that she stood staring at it in a kind of trance, as though a ghost had risen before her. Nor was she alone in her bewilderment, for the moment she entered the room every eye had turned from Ruth to the portrait, and from the portrait back

to Ruth. Mr. Bruen observed the movement, slight as it was, and raised his own eyes to the picture with a pained and mournful expression.

"Your mother, my child," he said, in a low, quick voice to Ruth. "That is your mother as she was thirty years ago." There was an unaccountable nervousness in his manner, and he rubbed his hands together hard as he spoke.

"Mother,—my mother!" gasped Ruth; "I knew I had seen that face before."

"Yes, my child, you see it every time you look in the glass," replied her uncle; and, laying his hands on her shoulders, he turned her gently round, so that she beheld her own image, reflected side by side with the portrait, in an old-fashioned mirror that hung on the opposite wall. The resemblance was so striking as to startle her at first, but soon, forgetting her own face, she turned from the mirror, and, fixing her eyes again upon the picture, exclaimed, in innocent unconsciousness of the compliment she was paying herself, "How beautiful! how wonderfully beautiful!"

"Yes," answered Mr. Bruen, planting himself in front of the portrait, and warming with enthusiasm as he contemplated it, "that is one of Healy's best. He was fond of painting handsome women, and, by gad,—I beg your pardon, ladies,—he never had a better subject than Nettie Bruen. This was painted in Washington when my brother was in the United States Senate. Nettie Bruen, of Georgia, and Kate Audley, of Baltimore, were the stars of the republican court in those days, and the like of them has never shone there since."

"Kate Audley?" exclaimed Malvern, who had been an interested observer of this little scene. "That is my mother; she was a Baltimorean."

"The dev—— No, no, Margaret; I didn't mean it. The—the—the—God bless my soul!" cried Mr. Bruen, making a dash at Malvern, and seizing his hand in a grip that fairly made him writhe. "Why didn't you tell me at first that you were Kate Audley's son? You are a thousand times welcome here for your own sake, and a thousand times more for your mother's. Yes, yes, I remember now; she did marry a Malvern of Virginia. I used to love her like blazes myself when I was young; but all that is bravely mended now," he added, stepping behind his wife's chair and laying his hand caressingly on her shoulder, "and I could now shake hands with my old rival as cordially as I welcome his son."

"I am sorry to tell you," said Malvern, sadly, "that my father is beyond the reach alike of friendship or resentment."

"What! Charles Malvern dead? Why, I thought that, like myself, he was too old to be in the army," exclaimed Mr. Bruen, who, like most civilians in time of war, seemed to have a vague notion that men needn't die except in the army.

Audley related, as briefly as possible, the circumstances attending his father's death. He was too proud to reveal the almost complete destitution to which his family had been reduced by the destruction and confiscation of their property, but it was evident from the few facts he recited that they had suffered great reverses. Mr. Bruen was the most volcanic of Southern "fire-eaters," and regarded all who entertained sentiments different from his own as depraved beyond the pale of human endurance or the hope of divine mercy, and any recital of their exploits, military or political, caused such ebullitions of wrath as would have consigned the whole Yankee nation to the realms of Tartarus had George Bruen been the Rhadamanthus of human destinies. He listened attentively to Malvern's story, without saying a word until the latter had finished; then, bringing the clinched fist of his right hand with a loud whack into the open palm of the other, exclaimed,—

"By——" But checking himself suddenly at the opening monosyllable as he remembered that he could not do justice to the subject in the presence of ladies, he grasped the tongs, and gave such a violent poke to the fire that he sent little brands flying all over the room, to the great consternation of the ladies grouped around. Having thus given expression to his feelings, he stood for a moment with his hands folded behind him, gazing absently into the fire; then, after a short silence, he turned to Malvern and asked, abruptly,—

"Where are your mother and sisters now?"

"My eldest sister, Mrs. Ashley, is with her husband in Charleston. Julia, the younger, and my mother have been living for a year past at H——, in the suburbs; but as that place is in danger of becoming very soon the seat of active military operations, they will have to seek another refuge; they were undecided when I left them where they would go."

"Undecided!" cried Mr. Bruen. "Bless

my soul, what right have they to be undecided while I have got a roof to shelter them? Why didn't you bring 'em straight here with you? I take it hard now that a man's old friends should slight his house in that way when they have been turned out of their own by a set of d—d, infern—— I didn't go to say it, Margaret, but you know they are a confounded, infern—— I beg your pardon, ladies;—but it ain't too late yet," he continued in his odd way of jumbling things together. "Run, Claude, my dear, fetch pen and paper for Colonel Malvern, and we'll hurry and get the letter off to South Ambury before the mail closes. Here you, Tom, Dick, Cæsar; ho, there, you rascal!" flinging open a window and bawling with all his might; "tell black John to saddle the gray mare and be ready to carry a letter to town right away —run, you rascal, run,—a letter to town before the mail goes out, and tell him to water his horse at the Blue Spring as he comes back, and to ride her with the snaffle bridle. Quick, you rascal; what are you waiting for? Now, colonel," placing before Malvern the dainty little writing-case that Claude had brought, and turning over as he did so a bottle of violet ink on her delicately-perfumed paper. "But, bless my soul!" he exclaimed, as his eye fell upon Malvern's bandages, "it's your right arm that's wounded, and you can't write. Well, no matter; Claude shall be your amanuensis."

Audley took advantage of this pause in his host's volubility to begin a polite remonstrance; for, remembering his conversation of the night before with George Dalton, he felt that his sister could never consent to be a guest under the same roof with him.

"I am very grateful for your kindness, Mr. Bruen," he began, "but——"

"But!" cried Mr. Bruen. "This is no time for *buts;* we'll have no *buts* about it. I tell you they must come. Claude, my dear, write a letter to Colonel Malvern's mother and sister, telling them to come and make my house their home till the war is over: till doomsday if they like; and, Margaret," turning to his wife, "don't you think you had better add a line yourself?"

"I was just going to ask," said Mrs. Bruen, producing pen and paper from a drawer of her work-stand, "if I might write; and I shall tell Mrs. Malvern," she added, with a laugh, "that if she don't come I will believe it is because she is afraid of making me jealous."

Audley renewed his protestations: he represented the long distance, the hazardous journey, the impossibility of two ladies undertaking it alone, but Mr. Bruen set aside all his objections.

"Tut, tut, the journey's nothing," he said; "and there's my agent, Chaffler and Doyle,—Doyle, I mean, coming from Charleston on the 15th. I'll write him to fetch them. Where is George, I wonder? He ought to be here to write this letter for me; the trifling dog is never up to breakfast. Margaret, you ought not to indulge that boy so; he won't be worth pickin' up with the tongs if you let him go on."

Mr. Bruen's abuse of George was like an Englishman's abuse of his country,—he indulged in it freely himself, but would have broken the head of any one who had dared to agree with him.

Thus grumbling and railing at George, the old gentleman sat down and penned, in awful hieroglyphics, the following characteristic lines:

"SANDOWNE, Dec. 5th.

"DEAR DOYLE,—

"There are some ladies in H——, Mrs. Malvern and her daughter, who are to come here with you. Stop for them on your way, and bring them dead or alive.

"Yours, etc.,

"G. BRUEN."

He secretly inclosed a check, with sealed instructions for Doyle to defray all expenses, and then the letters were ready to be posted.

Audley, unable to write a line himself, yet feeling the absolute necessity of warning Julia, saw that no course was left him except to apply to Claude. She was sitting apart from the rest of the company, finishing her letter. Audley approached, and bending over her, said, in a low voice,—

"Miss Harfleur, I am in a difficulty and want your assistance."

She laid down her pen and looked up at him.

"You are a woman," he continued, "and your delicate womanly instincts will understand me without many words. You asked me last night if George Dalton was not the victim of a hopeless passion. I evaded your question then, but now I answer that he is."

A bright smile overspread Claude's features.

"He does love another, then," she said, in a tone the reverse of a tragedy queen who has discovered herself the dupe of a

faithless deceiver. It was plain that these two young people were just as far from being in love with each other as might be expected of a young couple whom all their friends were bent upon bringing together.

"Yes," said Audley; "and you will understand my motive in imparting this confidence to you, when I tell you that my sister is the object of that passion. She has behaved badly towards George; and the relations between them are such that she ought not—must not—enter this house; but she does not know that George is here, nor what position he holds in his uncle's house; and unless warned in time,—you understand me, Miss Harfleur; you feel as one high-minded woman should for another, and will give the needed warning? Just add one line to your letter; say that this is George Dalton's home, and Julia will not come."

Claude laid her hand on the pen, and hesitated a moment before taking it up; then raising her eyes to Malvern's face, she answered, pleasantly, but decisively,—

"I will not do that, but I will invite her to my house nstead."

Claude had secretly resolved that Julia Malvern and George Dalton should meet again, and that they should be reconciled. She was aware of her uncle's designs with regard to George and herself, and she knew that whichever thwarted them would be likely to forfeit his favor and fortune as well. She had made up her mind from the first that she would never marry George; but it occurred to her now that if she could make him refuse to marry her instead, it would be a much better move,—for Claude was as worldly as she was beautiful.

Audley had no time for further remonstrance; for before Claude could finish her letter breakfast was announced, and Mrs. Bruen rose to lead the way into the dining-room.

It was one of those royal breakfasts, almost barbaric in its bounteous profusion, that one finds nowhere else on the face of the earth except at an old-fashioned Georgia country house. Stuffed partridges, broiled snipe, fragrant sausages, venison-steaks, filled the air with savory odors. Rare old "Georgia biscuit," crisp and flaky from "Maum Judy's" kneading-tray; hot rolls, fairly bursting out of their crusts; brown toasts, swimming in baths of boiled cream and eggs; wafers, thin and dainty enough to set before the fairy queen, piled up in generous heaps till they toppled like the leaning tower of Pisa, and threatened to demolish in their fall Miss Cassandra's artistic little butter-balls; omelets, light as feathers, and waffles, steaming yet in memory of the kitchen fire, all lay spread in tempting profusion on the rarest of china and damask, making the beholder hungry in spite of himself.

As Mr. Bruen entered the dining-room with his guests, Uncle Aby and his staff of waiters stood ready to receive them, ranged in two straight lines on either side of the room, dressed in their livery of white cotton aprons, with their shining black faces full of eager self-importance. If old Aby had been a field-marshal at the head of an army, he could not have been more impressed with the dignity of his position.

The guests proceeded to seat themselves, and Ruth was about to slip into a chair at a corner of the table beside her aunt, when the old head-servant interposed, with much bowing and scraping.

"No, miss; I ax pardon, miss, but dis ain't be your seat, miss," he said, with a dab of the head forward and a kick of the foot backward at each pause; and, conducting her to the opposite side of the table, pointed out a plate upon which lay an exquisitely-arranged bouquet of white camellias and autumn roses. Ruth regarded the flowers with pleased surprise, and turned upon Uncle Aby with a look of inquiry.

"It is only a little compliment, my dear," said Mr. Bruen, whose attention had been attracted by the old negro's manœuvre, "that Aby has paid you on your return."

"No, sir; but I ax pardon, sir, fur it wasn't me done it, massa; I wouldn't 'a ben so *indigenous*," said poor old Aby, making a leap in the dark after *invidious*. "I'd 'a made a *bo*quet for all de ladies ef it *had* 'a been me done it," continued the sable Talleyrand, with a bow and scrape all around the table; "but it was Mass' Bruen,—he put 'em dar hissef, wi' his own hands, and he say dey was for his sister Ruth, and say she must set dar."

Mr. Bruen fairly stood agape at this unheard-of amenity on the part of the young savage, while Ruth, delighted and gratified, gathered up her flowers, and placed them in a goblet of water by her side.

It was not until breakfast was nearly over that George Dalton, habitually a late riser, made his appearance, bearing in his face, Audley observed with regret, visible marks of the past night's dissipation. He paid his respects to the com-

pany with a scarcely-perceptible inclination of the head, and then taking a leisurely survey of the table, dropped into a vacant seat beside Ruth, while his uncle, making an abrupt transition from the merits of snipe and sausages, upon which he had been discoursing the moment before, proceeded to make George's delinquencies the text of a harangue upon the virtues of punctuality and early rising, in which Dr. Franklin's famous fallacy figured with due solemnity, and half the crimes and miseries of human life were shown to be the direct offspring of lying abed too late.

George, in the mean time, paid not the slightest attention to the oracles the old gentleman was delivering for his benefit, but, fixing his eyes upon his fair neighbor, regarded her attentively for some moments without speaking, then, apparently pleased with the result of his first quiet survey, he coolly pushed aside Bruen's bouquet, that seemed to interfere with his view, and, leaning one arm on the table, continued his inspection of her countenance. Ruth made an indignant gesture towards replacing the flowers, but was forestalled by George, who, without appearing to notice her resentment, and looking most provokingly unconscious of having done anything out of the way, quietly placed the flowers beyond her reach, and then proceeded to make himself known.

"Since nobody seems disposed to introduce us," he said, "I suppose we must contrive to get acquainted without that formality, and if you are, as I presume, my newly-arrived cousin from New Orleans, I trust I am not taking too great a liberty in claiming a share of your notice. There was a time," he continued, laughing, "when you did not deny me any cousinly privilege I chose to claim,—but I see that you have lost all recollection of your childish friendship for George Dalton."

Ruth gave a slight start at the name. It had a familiar sound, and brought back to her mind the long-forgotten image of a tall youth in military dress, who had visited Sandowne occasionally during her childhood, and made a great pet of her. She remembered now, with a blush, her childish fondness for him, and the kisses and caresses her innocent lips had bestowed upon her youthful hero. She raised her eyes to the speaker with a look of recognition, but the handsome, dissipated face bending over her was so unlike the fresh, happy, boyish countenance of her childhood's friend, that she turned away, pained and disappointed, without saying a word.

"You don't seem disposed to acknowledge the relationship," said George, observing her embarrassment. "Well, perhaps you are right, for I don't know that I am much of a credit to the family, and you needn't claim kin with me if you don't like; but I do declare," he added, taking up his knife and fork, "it don't look civilized for us to sit here together during the whole of breakfast and not exchange a single word. I wish you would say something to me, just for appearances' sake."

Ruth began to laugh in spite of herself. Drunken vagabond though he was, there was something about George Dalton that no man, woman, or child could ever resist. He was tolerated, humored even, in things that would not have been endured an instant in any other man; and while the world looked grave, and shook its head, and warned its daughters against him, it could not, somehow, wholly subtract itself from his influence. Ruth, who but a moment before had thought of quitting the table to get rid of him, now felt sorry when she saw the rest of the company rising to go.

"It is too late to think of our table manners now, as breakfast is over with the rest of us," she said, smiling, as she rose from her chair.

"And you are going to leave me to finish mine alone? That's worse than unneighborly, it's——"

"Only the natural consequence of being too late," put in Ruth, with mock solemnity, and a sidelong glance at her uncle.

"This is the first positive experience I have ever had of the moral my uncle has so long been trying to impress upon me," said George. "There, you have actually surprised me into a compliment."

"I hope you won't suffer any loss of appetite from the unwonted exertion," said Ruth, gayly, and glided from the room.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. BRUEN AS ENVOY EXTRAORDINARY.

On the second morning after Ruth's arrival at Sandowne it was discovered, by scouts sent out for the purpose, that the

waters of Chickassennee Swamp had subsided sufficiently for her to proceed on to her father's house. Mr. and Mrs. Bruen determined to accompany her, and the Miss Norgoods, with two of their cousins, having kindly volunteered to spend a few days with Claude at her own home, she invited Malvern, and a number of other young officers who were visitors at Sandowne, to join the party at the White House, as Mr. Harfleur's place was called.

The family coach of the Bruens was a marvelous structure,—a sort of cross between an old-fashioned carriage and a peddler's wagon, that went by the name of "Noah's Ark," from the old coachman, who was called "Uncle Noah." It was, moreover, fairly entitled, by its venerable age, its wonderful storage capacities, and the heterogeneous character of its cargoes, to rank with that noted scriptural structure. For all kinds of service, whether to fetch a bale of dry goods or a bevy of beauties from South Ambury, Uncle Noah and the ark were in requisition, while a handsome carriage and two modern phaetons stood in the coach-house moulding away for want of use.

But though it had seen its best days long ago, and was now getting very shaky about the joints, the ark was as comfortable an old rattletrap as ever was set upon wheels,—easy-going as a rocking-chair, and very popular with the ladies, because they could pack into it flounces and all without mashing.

There was a great stir that morning getting vehicles and horses ready, and another great stir to get the ladies ready, —for who ever heard of a woman being ready to start anywhere in time? And Mr. Bruen, who made a hobby of punctuality, would fume and fret if the carriage was kept waiting an instant, as though it were an express-train running on schedule time. At last, when all had departed except the old ark, which was to convey Mrs. Bruen and her two nieces, Mr. Bruen himself set out on the little bay nag he was accustomed to ride by a near cut to the White House. On account of the high water, it would be necessary for the carriages to take a circuitous route by what was known as the "Old Moss Bottom Ford;" while Mr. Bruen, by taking advantage of a narrow crossing lower down the stream, would be able to reach the White House several hours ahead of them and give notice of Ruth's arrival, which he had his own reasons for supposing would not be a pleasant surprise to Julian Harfleur.

The place known as the White House had been originally settled by Mr. Harfleur's father-in-law, Randolph Bruen. The house was quite a pretentious edifice for that part of the world, being a two-story framed building that had once been dignified with a coat of paint,—whence its name, bestowed in wondering admiration by the country people, unaccustomed to more ambitious structures than the rude but comfortable log cabins with which even the great planters usually contented themselves. A broad wooden colonnade —that architectural anomaly to which Southern houses owe half their comfort— ran all around the house, protecting the interior against the glare of an almost tropical sun and furnishing a delightful promenade. On the western side the spaces between the columns were filled in with trellis-work for the support of creeping vines, which clambered up to the roof and fell back again in showers of gorgeous blossoms, that rendered the air in spring-time almost oppressive with their fragrance. In winter, when flowers were wanting, the changeless green of the rose and jessamine-vines produced a scarcely less picturesque effect, folding themselves around the stout wooden columns in many a serpentine coil, or tumbling headlong to the ground in a sombre cataract of green and gray. On touching the earth many of these vines had taken root again, and overwhelmed with their leafy spray a row of wild olives and willow-oaks that bordered a walk running just outside the piazza, converting its once broad, graveled area into a narrow tunnel under a vault of living green.

The garden, though bearing traces of careful culture in former days, appeared to have been neglected by its present owners, a circumstance which, far from diminishing, greatly enhanced its beauties, by giving nature a larger share in them. Here, the wild bamboo and scarlet trumpet-vine might be seen interlacing their tendrils with the rarest of creeping roses; there, the wild azalea rivaled in its beauty the proud camellia, and the pale swamp-lily bloomed side by side with the crimson amaryllis. The walks in many places were so choked with overgrown hedges and tangled vines that it was not easy to force a way through them, but they well repaid the trouble by furnishing a thousand little shady nooks where the loiterer might linger all a summer's day safe from the obtrusive sunshine.

The house faced the river, which here bent itself into a long horse-shoe curve,

and was situated on a bluff overlooking the stream. This bluff, though rising only some forty or fifty feet, was a very respectable elevation for that flat country; and its situation at the head of the curve, commanding as it did an extended view both up and down the stream, rendered it a picturesque, if not an imposing site for a building. The space between the arms of the bend, on the other side of the river, was a low hammock, covered with an almost impenetrable thicket of amphibious shrubs and gigantic creepers, beyond which a field of old pines reared their tall, skeleton trunks, looming in the distance like the masts and spars of a stranded fleet. Both banks of the river were lined with magnolias, water-oaks, and cypress, whose rich foliage, shrouded though it was under a melancholy drapery of long, gray moss, afforded a pleasant relief to the eye from the eternal pines that surrounded the house in every other direction.

It was said that old Randolph Bruen had selected this picturesque site in deference to the taste of his daughter Nettie, who had her way about everything, and that most of the improvements made upon it were at her suggestion. However that may be, the founder of the White House seemed to have been guided by very correct ideas of the fitness of things, and in this respect his successor, likewise, was evidently not deficient. There were none of those startling incongruities that used to perplex and astonish strangers amid the rude magnificence of our old plantation life. Audley observed, as he entered the Harfleur estate, that the gates through which they passed turned smoothly on their hinges, the road leading to the house was neatly causewayed in marshy places, and shaded by a fine avenue of live-oaks, while the grounds immediately about the house were surrounded with neat picket-fences, instead of the rude pine rails that disfigured the inclosures at Sandowne. But for all that, he could not help feeling that Sandowne had, somehow, the advantage over its more ambitious neighbor. There was a cheeriness, a home-look about the jolly old log cabin, that were wanting to the colonnaded villa; he missed the merry song and loud "yah, yah" of the negroes, the busy, joyous, stirring life that had greeted his first arrival at Sandowne. It was the time of day at which most of the hands were off in the fields at work, but the few they met belonging to the estate were poorly clad, and wore a dull, cowed look, in striking contrast with the greasy contentment that beamed in the shining black faces of George Bruen's dependents.

Audley and George Dalton, who were on horseback, had stayed behind with the ark, which Uncle Noah had been ordered to keep a little in the rear of the other vehicles; so that when they drew up at the door of the White House the master, notified by the arrival of the other guests, was standing on the piazza to receive them. These sudden surprises were so common in those days, and the planters' style of living so well adapted to the purposes of hospitality, that the arrival of any number of unexpected guests never created the least disturbance in the domestic arrangements of a family, beyond the ordinary bustle of receiving and welcoming visitors. Even this was conducted with such order and propriety at the White House, that good Mrs. Bruen, accustomed to the boisterous hospitality of her own establishment, inwardly congratulated herself that Mr. Bruen had broken the news in such good time to Julian, and prepared the way for Ruth's reception. Instead of the general hurly-burly that had greeted Audley's first arrival at Sandowne, three or four well-trained servants moved about silently, unloading the carriages, and assisting the ladies with their parcels; while a handsome, middle-aged mulatto, attended by a troop of housemaids, over whom she seemed to exercise a sort of general supervision, received the ladies with an air half regal, half obsequious, and conducted them to their apartments. There was a whispered scandal in the neighborhood, to the effect that this woman, upon whom George Dalton had conferred the sobriquet of Cleopatra, from her magnificent air, filled the double office of mistress and maid in her master's establishment. With this, however, the present narrative has nothing to do, though it will be seen in the sequel that Julian Harfleur's character was such as to warrant almost any suspicion against it.

Though Colonel Malvern was far from favorably impressed by what he had heard of Mr. Harfleur, his curiosity had been excited in no small degree concerning him. It was, therefore, with no ordinary interest that he observed the master of the White House, who, recognizing the ark as it drew up at the gate, and judging that Mrs. Bruen and Claude were within, immediately disengaged him-

self from his other guests and advanced down the front walk to receive them.

He was a tall, spare man, well past the prime of life, faultlessly dressed, and of a most striking aspect. There was a foreign air about him, which is not to be wondered at, since his parents were French creoles, who had fled from St. Domingo during Toussaint's insurrection. His carriage, though haughty, was graceful and elegant in the extreme; and it cannot be denied that Julian Harfleur, at the age of fifty-two, was still a strikingly-handsome man,—but it was a dark, terrible beauty that made the beholder shudder. His eyes were deep-set, black, and piercing, flashing with a brightness that seemed as if it could scorch and wither, but never warm and lighten. His moustache and eyebrows were but slightly touched with gray, while his hair was almost perfectly white, and contrasted strangely with the dark olive of his complexion. The lips were pressed together with rigid firmness, and there was a stern, iron look about the face that reminded Audley of a portrait he had seen at Brussels of the terrible Duke of Alva. He remembered the shuddering horror with which Ruth had tried to shut out the memory of that dark, beautiful face, as it rose before her in fancy, and he turned his eyes suddenly from the father and fixed them upon the daughter. She had lowered her veil, so that he could not see her changing color; but, as he assisted her to alight, he felt her hand tremble violently, and she leaned heavily upon his arm, as though scarce able to support herself.

Claude, brushing lightly past them, bounded to meet her father; throwing her arms about his neck, kissing him, and stroking his gray hairs with her pretty fingers, just as if he had been like any other father. The iron look melted away, and the scorching light of the fierce black eyes softened into something like healthy sunshine, as Julian Harfleur surveyed his beautiful daughter with an air which plainly told that all his affection, and, what was much more to him, his pride and ambition, were centred upon her. Her presence seemed to diffuse sunshine around him, and gave to his native elegance and grace of manner a blandness and cordiality almost attractive. He received Audley very graciously; then turned with courtly deference to Mrs. Bruen, who had purposely lingered behind with Ruth. The latter, encouraged by the blandness of his manner, lifted her veil, and fixed upon him an appealing look, as her aunt drew her timidly forward, saying, with a forced smile,—

"I suppose, Julian, Mr. Bruen has already prepared you for the return of this wanderer?"

If the Gorgon's head had suddenly been unveiled before him it could not have produced a more petrifying effect upon Julian Harfleur. He stood as if paralyzed, and riveted upon the fair face before him such a look as no words can describe. It was not astonishment, it was not fear, it was not anger nor abhorrence, that stamped itself on his features, but a mingling of all; while a slight quivering of the muscles about the mouth, and a sudden rigidness that came over the hand he was in the very act of extending, changing the cordial grasp to a convulsive clutch in the air, betrayed the silent workings of some terrible passion. In an instant, however, he recovered himself, and overcame his emotion before an ordinary observer would have had time to perceive it. A frigid smile overspread the iron features, like winter sunlight struggling through a stormy sky; the clinched fingers relaxed enough to extend themselves mechanically towards Ruth, who touched them as mechanically with her own, and turned away with a look of unutterable bitterness. Mr. Harfleur then offered his arm to Mrs. Bruen, and Audley overheard her say, as he followed them into the house,—

"I was afraid, Julian, the likeness to Nettie would overcome you. It's like meeting her ghost; and I knew you couldn't stand it if taken unawares."

But Julian Harfleur was taken unawares. When Mr. Bruen, who had been dispatched in the emergency to inform him of his daughter's arrival, had gone over two-thirds of the way, he discovered that one of his horse's shoes was loose, and stopped at a little smithy by the roadside to have it mended. The operation did not occupy more than half an hour, but the old gentleman in the mean time having become absorbed in a mental dissertation upon the merits of salt-water baths as a preventive of rheumatism,—for, in addition to his other vagaries, he was a bit of an amateur quack,—did not observe when he remounted that his horse's head was turned in the direction from which he had just come; and the sagacious animal, remembering the generous barns and corn-cribs of Sandowne, put back towards them with such good will that an hour later, precisely at the time when Uncle Noah's ark was

rumbling up the avenue that led to the White House, the old gentleman was suddenly roused from his reverie by the stopping of his nag, and, looking out from the depths of his shirt-collar, was surprised and bewildered beyond measure to find himself standing in front of his own door.

CHAPTER XVI.

WAS IT A GHOST?

Some half a mile from Mr. Harfleur's dwelling, near the spot where the public road entered his estate, there stood a long, steep-roofed cabin of hewn logs, with the gable end facing the road, and surmounted by a rude wooden cross. This was the place where such of the neighboring families as adhered to the Episcopal form of worship assembled once a month, under the auspices of a clergyman from South Ambury, to join in that beautiful liturgy whose prayers and anthems, hallowed by the lips of saints and martyrs, have ascended through long ages a cloud of sweet incense to heaven, and seem to the devout heart almost like the utterances of inspiration. Here, too, in this remote solitude, where the wind sounds night and day its ceaseless requiem in the pines, they laid their dead. Here, mouldering away in her native dust, lay the beautiful "Antoinette, daughter of Randolph and Lilias Bruen, and wife of Julian Harfleur. Born May 4th, 1821; died December 6th, 1849, in the 28th year of her age." So says the epitaph on the plain marble cross that marks her resting-place under the wild myrtle-tree in a solitary corner of that solitary church-yard. Poor girl! she had sad need of rest, when tired and foot-sore she sank down scarce half-way on her journey of life, and laid her weary head upon the lap of mother earth. She had been a famous beauty in her day,—a willful, spoiled, capricious beauty,—whose charms proved at last only the snare in which her happiness was lost forever.

As Noah's Ark went lumbering on its way towards the White House, Ruth had looked eagerly round for some familiar object, but everything seemed hazy and confused. The river and the pines were there, with due succession of field, forest, and jungle, but somehow everything had transposed itself in her memory; nothing seemed in its natural place until the steep roof of the little pine church, surmounted by its wooden cross, rose upon her view. It was indistinct at first, and seen only by snatches through the intervening pines, but it was like an old landmark to her memory. From that moment everything seemed to glide into its natural place, and she knew what to look for next. She remembered the cluster of white tombstones grouped around this little church in the wilderness, and she knew long before they came in sight of it where to look for the white cross that had been put there just a little while before she left her home.

Ah, there it stands now, gleaming as of old among the myrtle-leaves, a little weather-stained by the storms of all these winters, but looking so like it did on that day fifteen years ago, when her old mammy had taken her to say "good-b'ye" to mamma, that she almost wonders if the traces of her childish tears are still visible on the polished stone, and if the wreath of white lilies her hand had placed there still hangs upon the cross. No; it is only a festoon of gray moss that has dropped from an overhanging myrtle-bough and lodged upon Nettie's tombstone, waving in solemn measure to the melancholy music of the pines. Something else moves too, but Ruth scarcely perceives it as she whirls rapidly by. A strange man of ruffianly appearance is standing before the cross, tracing out with his finger the inscription obscured by mould and moss; but, on hearing the sound of wheels, he starts, turns suddenly away, and vanishes among the tombs, leaving upon Ruth's mind, as the whole scene fades from her view, a vague impression of having seen a human figure flit through the church-yard.

But the white cross, with the memories it awakened, did not pass from her mind. She longed to return to the spot before it was well out of her sight, and the painful tumult of emotion raised in her breast by her father's greeting made her but yearn the more towards the shrine where her tenderest affections lay entombed. Her first thought on reaching the White House was to seek out that good old nurse, the only being, besides her mother, who had ever shown much regard for the forlorn and desolate child. She learned, with pain and surprise, that her mammy had been sold to traders years ago when she herself was first sent away, and Cleopatra, commonly known by the less ambitious

designation of "Maum Judith," installed in her place as housekeeper and head-servant at the White House.

Disappointed of finding the only friend she sought among the living, her thoughts turned once more towards the dead. So, while the rest of the company were assembling in the drawing-room before dinner, Ruth put on her hat and shawl and set out unobserved on her solitary walk. She did not stop to reflect on the imprudence of going unattended at that late hour over an unfrequented road. It was a relief to get out of a house from which everything that loved her had been banished, and where she felt herself an alien and an intruder, though it was her father's house.

Half an hour's rapid walking brought her to the end of the long sandy lane that lay between old Randolph Bruen's live-oak avenue and the primeval pines that shut in the little forest church-yard where her mother lay. She had not encountered a living creature by the way, and no sound, save a distant tinkling from some homeward-bound herd, came to interrupt the melancholy course of her reflections. The scene and the hour seemed to accord with Ruth's feelings, and she walked along, absently crushing under her feet the great brown pine-cones that lay scattered on the ground, until she arrived at the church-yard gate. She paused a moment, with her hand on the latch, while a flood of old recollections came rushing back upon her mind. She remembered how often she had been led through that very gate by her mother's hand, and how proudly she used to carry the little black book with the gilt cross on the back out of which her mother used to read her prayers, and how she, with childish ambition, would look over and make believe that she was reading too. It seemed to her that her mamma was very fond of going to church, and used to say a great many prayers. She was very sad, too, and used to weep bitterly at times when Mr. Harfleur was out of the way. Could it have been that she was grieving over his absence? At such times, too, she would seem doubly fond of her little Ruth, and would cover her with caresses and call her her consolation and her only joy. Frequently mamma would walk with Ruth and her old mammy to the little church and play on the organ for hours together and sing beautiful anthems, and when Ruth tried to sing with her, would smile, and call her mamma's little mocking-bird. She remembered how proud she used to feel when her mamma led the music in church on Sundays, and how she used to stand on tip-toe to turn over the leaves, and what a grand thing she thought it to play an organ in a church. Then came to her mind the last time she had gone there with her mamma. It could not have been long before her death, and was on just such an evening as this. The great brown cones lay scattered upon the ground as now, for she had picked up one to play with, she remembered, and her mamma had paused once or twice during their walk to look up at the gray sky and listen to the solemn whispers in the pines. After they went into the church, she did not sing, but sat longer than usual at the organ, playing something that reminded her little daughter very much of the music the wind was making in the pines; and the next moment Ruth started to find herself actually humming a strain of that long-forgotten melody. If there is such a thing as the ghost of a sound, this was one that came floating back so strangely in Ruth's memory.

There was something in the sound of her own voice that awed her back into silence; a sudden feeling of superstitious fear came over her. Was that a human step she heard? Was it a human form she saw flit an instant among the tombs, then vanish? She advanced a step, and looked around; there was no sound save the endless sighing of the wind, no movement save the trailing moss as it swayed to and fro in the breeze. She smiled at her childish terrors, and, opening the gate quickly, went and flung herself at the foot of the weather-stained cross that marked Nettie Harfleur's grave.

You who know what it is to kneel upon a mother's grave in anguish and desolation of spirit: you who have longed to rest your weary heads upon the cold turf above her breast, and to embrace the very clods that hide your treasure from your sight,—you can tell with what hopeless yearning Ruth embraced that senseless stone and poured forth her overflowing heart in prayer to the soul whose flight had made such a great void in her life. There is nothing like a mother's love, in heaven above or earth beneath, save the love that the great Father of us all bears to his children. It is so unobtrusive, so all-pervading, that, like the pure air of heaven, we hardly know what it is till it is gone. Unlike other human affections, it is self-subsisting and indestructible;

we could not make our mothers cease to love us if we would. We may repay their affection with baseness and ingratitude, we may wring and break their hearts if we will, but can never harden them against us. The more we wound their bosoms, the closer do they press us to them; the more we are despised, forsaken, and cast off by all the world, the wider do they open their arms to receive us. And how few of us ever think of all this, till the time comes when the memory of it mingles our grief with the gall and wormwood of remorse!

Little children, when their mothers die, are spared this pang of self-reproach that comes to us all when we look upon our mother's grave; and though at first the anguish of their young hearts may be keen as a two-edged sword, their feelings are elastic, and some new affection soon springs up to replace the old love that remains only as a sweet and precious memory. Such, however, was not the case with Ruth Harfleur. No kind aunty or good old grandmother had come to fill a mother's place for her. The nuns of St. Sacrament and St. Catherine's had been very kind to her,—Father Perline had been more than kind,—but what was there in all this to satisfy a craving heart? Fifteen years ago, she had turned from that grave a forlorn and desolate child, and now she came back to it a forlorn and desolate woman. No new affection had wrapped her in its folds, and her grief for the dead came back for a moment, as fresh and poignant as on that dreadful day, long ago, when she had clung, a frightened child, to her old mammy's apron, and heard the clods fall with a heavy thud upon her mother's coffin. The memory of it all came back to her now as vividly as if it had been but yesterday. She saw again the little trundle-bed in which she used to sleep, with her old mammy bending over her in the dim taper-light, and heard again the words that had so bewildered her on waking, "Come, my baby, your mamma's almost gone." She remembered how she had been carried in her little night-gown into the room where her mother lay, with a great many people sobbing around, and how she began to cry because the other people were crying. She remembered how some lady sitting by the bed had taken her in her lap and raised her up so that she could see her mother's face. She remembered the long, labored breathing, so loud that it could be heard all over the room, and the strange, frightened feeling that came over her, as she shrank back with awe, for the first time in her life not daring to touch her mother's lips. Then came another long gasp, followed by another, fainter, and another, fainter still,—then all was hushed. She knew then that this was death, and broke forth into loud lamentations. Suddenly, she heard her father's stern voice order some one to carry that child from the room, and felt herself borne off again in her old mammy's arms. The next thing she remembered, was standing at an open window with her mammy, watching the first faint streaks of the cheerless winter dawn break through the eastern sky. She heard the old negro say, pointing towards the dawn, "Her spirit's flew out to meet the light, and the heaven-bells is ringin' for to let her in." She looked out for the flying spirit, and listened for the heaven-bells, but saw only the rising mists of morning, and heard but the rushing of the river and the sighing of the wind in the pines.

Ruth sat for nearly an hour, lost in these mournful reflections, and did not observe that the day was rapidly declining. The sun had not yet set, but the sky was obscured by low clouds, and the towering shafts of the surrounding pines overshadowed the little church-yard and made it dusk there, even when the sun was high. At last she dried her eyes, and perceiving, with some anxiety, the lateness of the hour, gathered up her gloves and shawl and was preparing to leave, when she suddenly became aware of a human face looking at her from behind the marble cross,—white and motionless in the twilight, as if it had been a marble face. Paralyzed with fear, she sank back on the turf and sat staring in mute horror at this strange apparition, whose gaze seemed to hold her in a spell, like a bird charmed by a snake. Before she could recover herself the apparition made a sudden movement, and a tall, powerful figure rushed from behind the cross, and, seizing both her hands in a hot, frenzied grasp, fixed its eyes upon her face with a look that riveted her gaze as if she had been mesmerized. She was powerless either to move or speak. She tried to scream, but her voice stuck in her throat as in a nightmare.

The man, a ruffianly vagabond in appearance and dress, yet had a certain air of nobility in his bearing, and seemed greatly disturbed at the fright he had given her. He relaxed his grasp to a gentle pressure, and said, soothingly,—

"Don't be alarmed, Ruth; I am the last man in the world that would hurt you. Just let me look into your face a little, and——"

The sound of his voice roused her sufficiently to make a struggle for her release, and in doing so she freed one hand from his grasp, but left the costly ring that encircled her finger in his palm. He examined it thoughtfully, while he still held her by one hand, then replaced it gently on her finger.

"You would take better care of this, Ruth," he said, in a voice unsteady with emotion, "if you knew its history. This ring belonged to one of your race who was a famous singer, such as you wish to be, and it was first flung to her, just as it was to you, in the moment of triumph that followed one of her most brilliant performances. Your mother wore it too, a little while, and once she seemed to prize it, but——"

He stopped short, as though doubtful whether to proceed, and gazed sadly and wistfully into her face. He made a motion once or twice, as though about to speak, but finally thought better of it and remained silent. He held both Ruth's hands in one of his for a moment, and, taking her delicate chin in the other, turned her face up once more towards his own, gazed long and earnestly at it, then released her, saying,—

"You had better go home now. I'll stand at the gate here and watch till you are safe out of the woods. And hark you, child!" raising his finger with a warning gesture, "never mention this meeting till the time has come and I bid you speak."

Ruth needed no second admonition, but bounded away the minute his grasp was loosened, and fled as fast as her feet would carry her. The man, after first assuring himself by a cautious survey of the road that no one was watching him, stood at the gate and looked after her till she was out of sight, then slunk away into the forest.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE YOUNG SAVAGE TAMED.

Ruth never once paused in her flight till she reached the entrance of the lane, where, somewhat reassured on emerging from the obscurity of the forest into the cheerful light of the open fields, she halted a moment to take breath, and, assuring herself at the same time that no one was following, pursued her way more leisurely. She now had time to collect her thoughts, and recover a little from the terror and confusion of her recent singular encounter. She had been too much frightened at first to heed the stranger's words, but not a syllable had escaped her memory, and, as she began to ponder over what had happened, her astonishment and perplexity increased. She looked at the gem that glittered on her finger with a kind of awe, as though it had been a living eye, and wondered if what the stranger had said about it could be true, and how he came to know the circumstances under which she had received it. And what did he mean by saying that an ancestress of hers had been a public singer? It could not be old Mrs. Lilias Bruen, whose tombstone had borne witness these forty years and more to her many domestic virtues: tombstones didn't talk that way about actresses and *artistes*. Perhaps he referred to her father's mother, Madame Harfleur, whom she had never thought of before, and whose Christian name she only happened to know because her sister bore the same—Claude Eloise,—yes, that sounded more theatrical than plain Lilias Bruen; and then, that would account for her father's having so persistently opposed her own artistic aspirations; he shared the unreasonable prejudices of society, and was ashamed of his mother's profession. That was the reason, perhaps, why he had shut her up so early in a convent, to destroy, if possible, the taste that had manifested itself in her from childhood.

But then, if all the stranger said was true, where had the ring been wandering all this time? and what strange accident had brought it into her possession at last? And how came this miserable vagabond to know of her fleeting triumph under another name, in a city hundreds of miles away? and how came he to know so much about the history of her family?

But was this man a common vagabond? She had only seen him in the obscure twilight of the forest, and was too much frightened then to notice particularly, but in spite of his squalid habit and rude exterior, there was something in his manner, something in the very tones of his voice, that seemed to mark him as one accustomed to better things. Could he have been some poor maniac left to follow his own wandering fancies? No, he did not

look like that; and yet, what made him gaze at her in that strange wild way? and what could he mean by that last injunction to keep silence till he bade her speak? Did he expect to meet her again?

The more Ruth pondered over all these things the more perplexing did they seem to her. She was so absorbed in her own reflections, and so unnerved by the fright she had received, that she started in alarm at the sound of approaching footsteps, and her blanched cheeks did not lose their whiteness even when, on raising her eyes, she found herself face to face with Malvern, who was strolling down the avenue in quiet enjoyment of his after-dinner cigar. The young officer touched his hat and was about to pass on without further salutation, but as she looked up to acknowledge the civility he caught sight of her face, and suddenly halted, exclaiming,—

"Good heavens, Miss Harfleur, what is the matter? you look as if you had seen a ghost! Has anything happened? have you been frightened in any way?"

"N—o," faltered Ruth, remembering the man's injunction not to mention their interview, but unable to conceal her agitation. "I have only been walking very fast."

"Walking fast does not usually make people pale," returned Audley, smiling. "I am afraid you are not well," he continued, with an air of solicitude. "You look tired; may I not walk back to the house with you?"

"No, I am not sick nor tired; I am only very, very miserable!"

The words seemed to burst from her lips in spite of herself; and, breaking abruptly away, she hurried on towards the house before Audley had time to say another word. He stood looking after her for a minute or two, then pursued his walk, with a mind as full of confused and baffling thoughts as Ruth's own.

As she drew near the house, a sound of merry voices and laughter fell upon her ear, and light forms flitted to and fro in the piazza. Claude stood at the head of the steps dispensing smiles and glances among the knot of admirers clustered round her. The eldest Miss Norgood had taken George Dalton in tow, and was tugging him up and down the piazza, talking beautiful sentiment about the river view and Owen Meredith's poems,—an infliction under which poor George looked unutterably miserable; the more so, as he was always a little foggy after dinner, and wasn't quite sure but he might reply, "I prefer mine straight," every time Miss Norgood said anything particularly gushing and poetical about the water. Mary Dalton had got a fat old commissary major off behind a pillar, where she stood rolling cigarettes for him, and making believe that she was going to smoke one herself,—just for mischief, you know,—and puckering up her little rose-bud mouth with such a pretty grace, that the major resolved upon the spot to give up all thoughts of Claude Harfleur, though he felt morally certain she was only waiting for him to propose, and put in for the widow.

Ruth could not enter the house without going through the piazza, and she shrank from contact with the thoughtless, merry crowd, like some poor wounded creature of the woods, that steals away from its kind to languish and die alone.

Lifting the garden-latch noiselessly, she slipped in unobserved, and, turning down a little green alley near the gate, was soon lost in the shrubbery. A few turns through this labyrinth of vegetation brought her to the vine-covered walk already described, on the western side of the house. Charmed with the retirement of the spot, she glided under this tunneled network of vines, where, abandoning herself to reflection, she paced dejectedly to and fro without perceiving, in the more than twilight obscurity of the place, a small, dark figure crouched at the foot of a spreading willow-oak, and almost concealed in the trailing vines that clustered about it, till, in her third or fourth round, she was arrested by a gentle pull at her dress. She thought at first it was a thorn or brier, and turned to shake her skirts free, when a hand was laid timidly on her shoulder, and she heard her name whispered in the darkness. She recognized the voice at once, in spite of having, until that moment, heard only its harsher accents, and exclaimed, seizing the hand and pressing it affectionately in both her own,—

"Why, Bruen, my brother, what are you doing here, hid away all alone in this dark corner?"

"Better say what are you doing?" returned Bruen. "I've come to be out of the way, and listen for the music."

"The music?"

"Yes. When there's company, you know, they always have music in the evening. The drawing-rooms are on this side the house, and I come here to listen. Nobody else ever comes here, so there's no danger of getting in the way. I am

not allowed to go where I can be seen here, or to sit in the window, as I do at Sandowne. I wonder what's the reason they don't begin," he added, impatiently. "Claude and Miss Norgood are always mighty fond of showing off their hands on the piano. I have been waiting here ever since dinner, and thinking when they got through, somebody would ask you to play. I'd know it was you the minute your fingers touched the piano; but, instead of that, here you come moping off and hiding under the vines, just as if you were crooked too, and mustn't be seen."

Ruth was so moved at this spectacle of the neglected boy, crouching like a beast outside his father's door, that tears rose unbidden to her eyes, and, in a voice full of tenderness and compassion, she exclaimed,—

"My poor brother! is this the way they treat you?"

Bruen resented the words as if they had been a studied insult.

"What do you mean?" he cried, drawing away from her. "I don't want you to be pitying me; you are nothing but an object of pity yourself, though you ain't crooked. I've been watching you here ever so long, when you thought nobody was looking, walking up and down in the darkness, with your hands clasped on your breast, and your head bowed down, looking as miserable as Phædra in the play. Poor Ruth!" he added, in a softened manner, "you looked very unhappy, and I was sorry for you, and that was why I came and spoke to you."

Ruth was touched at this evidence of the boy's better nature.

"Were you sorry for me, Bruen? were you sorry for your poor, unhappy sister?" she said, stretching out her hands towards him, as eager to invite his sympathy as he had been to repel hers.

"Yes," he answered, drawing nearer, and his manner softening almost to tenderness. "I was sorry, because you looked unhappy, and you have been good to me,—nobody was ever so good before. What was the matter, Ruth? Has *he* been talking to you?"

"He—who—what?" cried Ruth, excitedly, her thoughts immediately reverting to the man she had seen in the church-yard.

"Hush: you know who," said the boy. "Don't talk loud, he's walking somewhere in the garden, and might hear. When I heard you were coming to the White House to-day, I got into the cotton-wagon with Uncle Pompey and came on ahead of you. I was watching from behind the Cape jessamines when he first met you, and I saw him scowl at you just as he does at me. What's the reason he don't like you, Ruth? You are not crooked nor lame."

Ruth breathed more freely on finding that Bruen was merely alluding to their father. She passed her arm lovingly round the poor deformed shoulders, and said, in a gentle voice,—

"My dear brother, it is not necessary to be deformed in body to be unloved; it is a crooked and perverse mind that people hate."

"But you haven't got a crooked or perverse mind, and yet he hates you. I saw it in his eyes," said Bruen, half returning her caress, as though drawn nearer to her by the consciousness that they were both objects of a common hatred. "I can't tell why it is," he continued; "you are as handsome as Claude, and a great deal better, and yet no one seems glad to see you."

"No one seems glad to see you." The words sank like a poisoned arrow deep into Ruth's soul.

"And you, Bruen," she said; "are you sorry that I have come back?"

"No," answered Bruen, earnestly. "I was at first, and hated you, because I thought you would be like all the rest of them; but you are not like anybody else I ever knew, Ruth, and I sha'n't be angry any more if you are sorry for me, for you don't treat me as if you thought I was some inferior being whose infirmities must be respected. That is why I don't mind your pity, and you may be sorry for me now if you like."

"No, let me love you instead," she said, soothingly. "Since nobody seems to care for either of us, we will make it up to ourselves by caring a great deal for each other, won't we, Bruen?"

The boy answered by drawing her face down to him and kissing it tenderly,—the first time he had ever volunteered such a pledge of affection to any living creature.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL.

Bruen Harfleur had been the victim of two opposite systems of bad training. In Mr. Harfleur's cold, selfish nature af-

fection could not survive the gratification that gave it birth. From the day of the accident that had changed his beautiful boy into an object of pity and loathing, the father's affection seemed changed to gall and wormwood, and he inwardly cursed the chance that had spared a life doomed henceforth to be but a sorrow and mortification to him who gave it. The bitterness of his disappointment embraced in its blind fury the unfortunate object of it, and he deplored the mortification of his own pride rather than the blighting and ruin of the boy's whole life. He could never bear Bruen in his sight, and the unhappy child grew up to boyhood, abandoned and neglected, hardly as civilized as the negroes to whose care he was left. He had never been allowed even to sit at table with his father and sister, but was left to pick up his meals like a beggar, in the kitchen, on the door-step, wherever and whenever the servants chose to give them to him, and, but for the voluntary care of the old woman Chloe, might have perished of want under his father's roof. A child's nature is keenly sensitive to neglect, and the first feelings young Bruen imbibed, leaving out that morbid sense of his deformity bordering almost upon monomania, were an unnatural aversion to his father and sister.

Though Claude had never devoted herself, as some women would have done, to the care of her unfortunate brother, she could not be accused of positive unkindness towards him. She was not ill-natured, but it had simply never occurred to her to disturb herself about a boy who took no pains to bring himself to her notice. Of course she was sorry for Bruen, but then, what could she do? There were servants to wait on him, and money to buy whatever he wanted, and what more did he require? Claude's passive nature could not conceive of any harm in simply letting a thing alone; she had been letting things alone all her life, and they had always turned out exactly as she wished; why should they not do the same for Bruen? She would have been very much astonished had any one reproached her with a positive fault in merely letting her brother alone, and would have burst into tears so prettily, and looked such a lovely picture of injured innocence, that the accuser would think he had made a mistake, and that Bruen was the party to be reproached instead of Claude.

When Bruen became old enough to think a little for himself, he avoided his father's house as much as possible, and betook himself to the kind-hearted old couple at Sandowne, who saw in his misfortunes as much occasion for humoring and spoiling as his father had found for cruelty and neglect. Mr. Harfleur, glad to get him out of sight on any terms, encouraged these visits, until the boy had come to make Sandowne virtually his home, and the occasion of Ruth's arrival was the first for more than twelve months on which he had voluntarily set foot in his father's house.

The extreme indulgence with which Bruen was treated by his aunt and uncle was as injurious, in its way, as the severity of his father. Had he merely been spoilt by too much petting from the first, he might have outgrown the evil, like any other spoiled child, but his character had suffered from the combined effects of two bad systems. After having all that was evil in his nature developed and exaggerated by ill-usage, he was then humored and confirmed in his faults by the injudicious tenderness of the old people. Whenever his conduct became very outrageous and unreasonable, Mrs. Bruen would say to her husband,—

"I declare, Mr. Bruen, you ought to make that boy mind. You'll ruin him, allowing him always to do as he pleases." And Mr. Bruen would reply,—

"Why, yes, of course, God bless my soul, Margaret, the boy must be made to behave himself; he wants a good thrashing, by G—!—may the Lord forgive me for saying it!—and you ought to make him obey you. I'll whip him myself if he does so again."

There was a tradition in the neighborhood that Mr. Bruen had twice in his life actually been wrought up to the point of applying the great moral remedy to Bruen with his own hand, but as he had used on one occasion a pine straw, and on the other a sprig of mint, as the instrument of correction, his exercise of discipline did not prove more effective than his wife's, which consisted in placing the boy on one side of her wardrobe door and industriously flogging the other.

The cause of these unusual outbreaks on the old gentleman's part was Bruen's rebellion against some of his sanitary measures. His passion for coddling and physicking, and quackery in general, kept him forever trying to regulate the diet and prescribe regimens for all who came about him. No matter how hearty you were, he was sure to press upon you his

latest pet system of dietary,—generally some dish to which he had himself taken a fancy, and which he therefore recommended as particularly wholesome. Or, perhaps, he would take up with some system of gymnastics, or water-cure, or rubbing, and, not content with riding the hobby himself, would insist on getting everybody else astride it with him. Young Bruen's bodily infirmities made him a tempting subject for experiment, and so long as the prescriptions were confined to recommending palatable dishes, or objecting to too close attendance at school, Bruen was obedient enough; but one winter, when the boy was about nine years old, his uncle suddenly became impressed with the efficacy of air-baths for the prevention and healing of all the ills that flesh is heir to. As the air-bath prescribed by Mr. Bruen consisted in getting out of bed just at daybreak, and running round the house three or four times in your night-clothes, and as the winter happened to be an unusually severe one, the unlucky patient naturally demurred to the prescription. It was his obstinate refusal to comply with this regimen that brought upon Bruen, on two successive mornings, the awful castigations mentioned above. In vain did the old gentleman storm and scold and lecture, through the entire season, upon the efficacy of air-baths, he never could induce a single individual to join him in testing their merits; and as he modified the prescription in his own case to capering half an hour every morning in a single garment before his bedroom fire, it is greatly to be feared that the virtues of the air-bath will never be practically revealed to mankind.

Such having been the course of Bruen Harfleur's early training, it is no marvel that he grew up a perfect little savage, whom compassion itself could hardly tolerate. He was a being of two natures, and only the evil as yet had shown itself, but the good was there all the same,—silent and torpid, but ready to wake at the touch of affection. Ruth somehow had found the right string, and the boy's better nature awoke responsive to her touch.

While the brother and sister were talking they had gradually approached the mouth of the leafy cavern where they had met, and Ruth, gently brushing aside the drooping boughs that almost closed the entrance, led her brother out into the lingering twilight of the garden. But the boy suddenly recoiled and slunk back behind the sheltering vines, while Ruth felt herself seized with a strange, uncomfortable sensation, when on raising her eyes she met her father's fixed full upon her. He was about to turn and leave her without speaking, when his glance happened to fall upon the hand which she still kept raised, mechanically holding back the foliage, in the attitude in which he had first beheld her. The gem upon her finger glittered like a star in the twilight, and its rays seemed to strike him with the influence of some baleful planet. The cold, iron look suddenly changed to a livid stare, and he seemed for a moment to have lost the power of speech and motion; then, recovering both by a sudden effort, he seized her hand in a grip like an iron vice, and gasped out the words,—

"Who—when—how did you get it?"

Ruth, alarmed at his manner, and oppressed by an uncomfortable sense of meriting his displeasure by the one act of disobedience in which she had set aside the paternal authority, gave a very confused and incoherent account of her personation of Sonata and the circumstances under which the ring had come to her. He listened with breathless attention, his eyes riveted upon her like two points of living steel that threatened to pierce her very soul. All that the strange man in the church-yard had said about the ring came rushing back to her mind, and filling it with vague conjectures as to the cause of her father's agitation, which she could not attribute wholly to mere dislike of the stage and anger at the step she had taken. She grew more and more embarrassed under his gaze, and finally broke down altogether, and turned away her face, unable to bear longer the cold, steely glitter of those merciless eyes, that seemed to be probing her inmost soul for something more than her words revealed,—something more than she knew or could tell.

Mr. Harfleur did not utter a word, but kept his eyes fastened on her for some moments with a look of scornful incredulity; then, releasing her hand, he turned abruptly away. He avoided the merry crowd on the front piazza, and, directing his steps towards the back part of the garden, entered a retired walk, screened on one side by a tall picket-fence and on the other by a hedge of Cape jessamines. Here, shut in from view on all sides, he paced slowly to and fro in the deepening twilight, a prey to some terrible emotion. The iron look of the cold, handsome features gradually relaxed

into an expression of intense agony, the proud head drooped forward as if weighed down by some overpowering care, and the hands that he held clasped behind him were locked together in a grip so tight that the blood settled in purple spots about the nails.

He had not taken many turns, when he suddenly halted with a gesture of impatience, as a side gate at the end of the alley opened, and the figure of a man advanced towards him. The intruder was an intensely clerical-looking individual, of the pale invalid type that is so interesting to sentimental maiden ladies and middle-aged widows; but in spite of his exemplary, ministerial air, there was a sneaky look about the pale blue eyes that made you suspicious. Mr. Harfleur's brow contracted as the young man approached, but his voice was bland and cordial.

"You here, Mr. Tadpole!" he exclaimed, in the tone of one who has received a pleasant surprise. "Where have you been all day? We missed you at dinner."

"I went home with the Widow Warren's son, after dismissing my school," said Mr. Tadpole, with a strong New England accent. "She's a truly pious woman, Mr. Harfleur, though she is poor; and it behooves a minister of the gospel, you know, not to despise the meek and lowly." And Mr. Tadpole looked very pious, and coughed a little pathetic cough,—it greatly behooves a minister of the gospel not to be too robust.

"I'm afraid it's too damp for you out here, my dear Æneas," said Mr. Harfleur, taking immediate advantage of the cough. "You had better go in, or you'll catch cold."

"Thank you, I guess there's no danger if I wrap up well," replied the other, drawing a crocheted woolen comforter, the gift of some pious marriageable sister in Israel, close around his neck, and adjusting it very carefully so as not to damage the fresh paper collar he had put on that morning; then, after an awkward silence, he resumed,—

"I have long desired a fitting occasion, Mr. Harfleur, for discoursing with you upon a subject that, a—a—ahem, lies very near my a—heart, and upon which all my hopes of such temporal happiness as a minister of the gospel may lawfully desire depend."

Mr. Harfleur's brow darkened, but his voice was soft and bland as he replied,—

"Well, Æneas, what is it about, and how can I assist you?"

"It is about Miss, a—a—ahem—Miss, Miss—your daughter."

"Well; and what about her?" said Mr. Harfleur, sardonically.

"Why, I am afraid,—that is, I do not think,—at least, I fear," continued Mr. Tadpole, casting about in vain for a form of words that would cover his embarrassment, "that she is not inclined to look as favorably upon me as I had a right to expect."

Mr. Harfleur darted at the speaker a furtive glance that would have struck him to the earth, if looks could kill, but he replied in a calm, mild voice,—

"Well, I hardly see how I can help you in that matter, Mr. Tadpole. Young ladies will be capricious and unreasonable in their fancies sometimes, and you must have patience; you know it is not in my power to make her fancy you; that must be your own work."

"But the parental influence——" began Æneas, unconscious of the scornful irony lurking in the other's words.

"Has done all it can in this case," said Mr. Harfleur, interrupting him with ill-disguised impatience; "and the day for shutting girls up in old castles and forcing them to marry against their will has passed away."

"But the moral influence," persisted Æneas, prudently edging off a little, "such as the deceased Mr. Randolph Bruen, for instance, may have exerted upon his daughter." And there was a sinister leer in the sneaky little eyes as they glanced furtively at the face of Æneas's companion.

Mr. Harfleur wrenched a sprig from an overhanging jessamine-bough, and wrung the unoffending plant with as good a will as if it had been Æneas Tadpole's neck; then, strewing the leaves upon the ground, he continued, placidly,—

"I cannot see that I have given you any just cause of complaint, Mr. Tadpole, or that any influence I could have exerted in your behalf has been left untried. I have received you into my family, where you enjoy constant intercourse with my daughter, and have assured you of my consent to your marriage whenever you win hers. If you are too modest to make her sensible of your merits, is that any fault of mine?"

"It does not become a minister of the gospel to dwell upon his own merits," said Æneas, totally obtuse to Mr. Harfleur's lurking sarcasm, "and the thoughtless and worldly-minded are ever prone to overlook them for more showy and en-

ticing qualities. Your daughter is continually surrounded with a set of shallow men of the world, who think lightly of the dignity of the sacred office, and your——"

"If my daughter has been wanting in the respect due to your office," interrupted Mr. Harfleur, glad to shift the ground of Æneas's complaint, "I shall reprimand her severely."

"It's a—a—— It's not that, exactly," stammered Æneas, hesitating, and instinctively edging away from his companion, "but I thought,—that is, ahem—I supposed—ahem—I think I may venture to suggest that you might, a—ahem, hint to her of the a—a—the obligations you a—owe to my family about a certain matter, in such a manner as would—ahem, decide her to look more favorably upon me."

Mr. Harfleur's countenance grew blacker than the sky above him, and his pent-up feelings burst out in words in spite of himself.

"Obligations!" he cried, in a quivering voice. "Have you come here to blackmail me that you dare to talk to me of obligations, when the child I committed to your father's charge is at this moment under my roof, calling up ghosts of what it were well for both you and me should be buried forever? You talk to me of obligations, when I have just looked into her face and seen her mother's features blazoned there, and on her finger the very ring——"

He suddenly checked himself, and arrested midway the clinched hand he had raised, with a menacing gesture, over Æneas's head. His soul seemed chained in secret bondage under the feet of this hated being, whose odious pretensions he dared not disallow even when they touched the idol of his heart,—the beautiful daughter, his love for whom was the one tender spot in his iron nature. He stood for a moment irresolute, like a man who feels that he has gone too far but does not know how to retrace his steps; then, with a desperate effort, biting his lips till the blood came through and stained his teeth, he forced himself to lick the dust under Æneas Tadpole's feet.

"I am afraid I have been hasty, my dear Tadpole," he began, extending his hand with an air of assumed frankness, "but I beg you will overlook it. I have been sorely tried by what has happened to-day, as you may well imagine, and was not quite myself just now. I am sorry to have made the son of my old friend the victim of an ill humor of which he was not the proper object; but anger, you know, is always blind."

Æneas had appeared staggered at first by Mr. Harfleur's sudden outburst, but as the violence of the latter subsided he gradually recovered himself, and a look of secret exultation gleamed in the small, weak-looking blue eyes as he came forward and placed his thin, moist fingers in Mr. Harfleur's soft but icy palm.

"It does not become a minister of the gospel," he said, piously, "to remember injuries, and I freely forgive any that you have done unto one of the humblest soldiers in the army of the Lord, for our weapons are not of this world. But in justice to my honored parent I must beg you to remember that it was yourself who removed from my father's hands the charge you had committed to them: it was you who, caring for the health of the body rather than the welfare of the soul, moved her from my father's roof to convey her to a more—ahem—salubrious climate."

There was a sinister irony in Æneas's last words that made Mr. Harfleur wince under them.

"Yes, yes, I have been unreasonable; a man in a passion always is," he answered, hastily, as if anxious to dismiss the subject; "but I know your ingenuous nature will overlook that. I will speak to Claude about you the first opportunity; the house is too full of company now to do anything, but as soon as we quiet down a little I'll have a private talk with her. In the mean time we had better go in; the night air is damp, and your lungs are weak: we must be careful."

"You were always very considerate of the health of those for whom you have a particular regard," muttered our exemplary young minister of the gospel, as he followed Mr. Harfleur into the house.

CHAPTER XIX.

RUTH MAKES A FRIEND.

Mr. Tadpole did not follow his host into the drawing-room, where the company had assembled, by this time, for the evening, but retired first to his own apartment, in order to rearrange his toilet; a business which he managed with com-

mendable economy, by turning his patent reversible perspiration-proof paper collar inside out, and carefully pinning his faultless clerical tie so as to conceal a slight fracture in his patent reversible paper shirt-front. He seemed to regard himself with peculiar complacency this evening, and adjusted with unusual care the thin lock that he had trained to fall over his tall, narrow forehead with a sweet curling grace, absolutely bewitching to the pious females of his flock. There was a complacent smile on the thin lips, and a gleam of secret triumph in the pale blue eyes, as though some idea long latent in his brain had suddenly developed into definite and alluring shape. "If she has fulfilled the promise of her youth, she must be even more beautiful than her sister," he said to himself, turning from the glass and beginning to pare his long thin nails; "and then, there would be no division of the property,"—his eyes began to gleam like a snake's,—"while Julian Harfleur's two children—yes, yes, if my father could manage it without compromising himself—and then gratitude ought to induce her——" he ended with a low laugh, and giving a final touch to the cherished tress over his temple, sallied forth, prepared for conquest.

After that strange interview with her father, the garden seemed to Ruth peopled with terrible shapes, and she fled to the friendly solitude of her own room, where she would have remained the rest of the evening but for the kindly solicitude of her aunt, who, missing her from the drawing-room, came to seek her and insist that she should go down-stairs and enjoy herself with the rest of the young people. Ruth could not explain why society possessed no attractions for her just then, and prepared reluctantly to obey. She lingered as long as possible over her toilet, from a desire to put off descending to the drawing-room, and not that she was sensible at that moment to the pleasure women find in standing before the glass to worry their hair and pin on bows. At last, when there was no longer any pretext for delay, she descended the stairs, and arrived at the drawing-room door simultaneously with Mr. Æneas Tadpole. He recognized her at once, his memory being assisted by her striking resemblance to the portraits he had seen of her mother; but Ruth, from whose thoughts nothing could be further removed than any expectation of again beholding this interesting companion of her childhood, was about to pass on without noticing him, when she was suddenly arrested by the tones of a voice that startled her by the odious associations they revived.

"Miss Ruthie," said the voice, whose accents she recognized unmistakably, "I guess you hardly remember the playmate of your childhood,—Æneas Tadpole, the son of your old pastor and instructor; but you see I have not forgotten you, Miss Ruthie."

Ruth's recollections of the Tadpole family were not of a nature to dispose her to reciprocate the friendly advances of Mr. Æneas, and his manner, stiff and constrained as it was, had a touch of familiarity in it that offended her. She resented his unwarrantable use of her Christian name, and, pretending not to see Mr. Tadpole's proffered hand, she answered, with a frigid bow,—

"I remember you now, Mr. Tadpole, since you have introduced yourself, but the meeting was so unlooked for it could hardly be expected I should have recognized you sooner. I had no idea of ever seeing you here."

In truth, nothing could have exceeded Ruth's surprise at this unexpected rencontre, except her displeasure, both of which were visibly depicted on her countenance; but as Mr. Tadpole never looked into people's faces when talking with them, this evidence of her regard was lost on him. Without lifting his eyes from the floor, which he was observing diligently, he continued, in reply to her last not very cordial remark:

"Nor would I have expected to be here at one time, Miss Ruthie, but a minister of the gospel must be prepared to go wherever duty calls. *Miss* Ruthie," he added, after a short pause, raising his eyes for an instant to her face, with what was meant to be a very bewitching glance, —not one of your naughty, rakish, black-eyed glances, but a nice, pious, modest little side glance, such as an exemplary young clergyman who is given to pious flirtations with devout females may lawfully dispense. "Must I say, *Miss* Ruthie? It used to be *Ruth* and *Æneas* when we were children,—and is not the simplicity of childhood very beautiful?"

"Miss Harfleur and Mr. Tadpole are no longer children," replied Ruth, haughtily; and, turning abruptly away, she passed into the parlor, Æneas following in her wake.

Not a word or a gesture of the scene transpiring in the hall had escaped Mr. Harfleur, who happened to command, from

the corner of the sofa, where he was imprisoned behind Mrs. Plato Plantagenet's flounces, a full view of the entrance. Yet his attention never once appeared to wander from that lady's edifying discourse, or his interest in it to flag.

"Certainly, Mrs. Norgood," he was saying, when Ruth entered the room. "I agree with you that it is highly important for those who occupy the first rank in society to guard their position with peculiar vigilance in times like the present, when that position is peculiarly liable to be assailed; and it is ladies of family and influence, like yourself, that must step to the front."

Really, Mr. Harfleur was charming this evening, thought Mrs. Norgood; for how could she tell that the smile upon his features was not a tribute to her own powers of fascination, but an involuntary betrayal of satisfaction at the rebuff that Ruth had given Æneas? How could any one, indeed, have guessed it, who had observed the habitual deference with which he treated this pattern young minister of the gospel?

There was something very perplexing to all Mr. Harfleur's acquaintances in the relation that seemed to subsist between him and Æneas Tadpole. They could not account for the marked consideration and attention which a man so haughty and fastidious extended to a person of so little apparent significance, and with no advantages of mind or person to recommend him. He was the son of a certain Reverend Nehemiah Tadpole, who had begun life in a pedagogue way at South Ambury when Julian Harfleur was a young man, and a strange intimacy had sprung up between the two, notwithstanding Harfleur's haughty disposition and the glaring disparities that existed between them, extending even to personal appearance. About the time of Harfleur's marriage, the Reverend Tadpole, who seemed to have met with a sudden run of luck, returned home, and reversed the old adage by becoming a great prophet in his own country. He was Mr. Harfleur's senior by a few years, and had brought with him, when he first came to South Ambury, a wife and an infant son, named Æneas, the pious hero of our tale.

Some years previous to Ruth's unexpected return home, Æneas Tadpole, lured perhaps by his father's former good fortune, had come South, under Mr. Harfleur's auspices, to begin life as his worthy parent had done before him. He was first employed as private tutor to Bruen Harfleur; but, at the request of some of the neighboring families, who found it inconvenient to send their boys to South Ambury for instruction, he opened a select school at a little country meeting-house in the vicinity, where he also officiated, occasionally, on Sundays, as an expounder of the gospel. Mr. Harfleur was scrupulously exact in attending upon Mr. Tadpole's ministrations with his entire household, a circumstance that would naturally of itself excite comment, since he was known to be a skeptic and contemner of all religion.

Old George Bruen, on the other hand, had conceived an invincible repugnance to Æneas from the very first; and it was the more singular that Mr. Harfleur should persist in countenancing the young man, that he always, in every other matter, paid the greatest deference to the opinions of the rich old uncle who had it in his power to do such great things for Claude.

But, notwithstanding his apparent regard for the pious Æneas, Mr. Harfleur had observed the advances of the latter towards Ruth with secret distrust, and her cold reception of them seemed to afford him unmingled pleasure. If Ruth had turned towards her father the moment after snubbing Æneas, she would have met the only approving glance he ever bestowed upon her, and the inward satisfaction he felt added unusual warmth to the graceful cordiality with which he rose to receive Mr. Tadpole, and engage him in conversation with Mrs. Norgood and himself.

In the mean time, George Dalton, contrary to his custom, which certainly was not to be very assiduous in his attentions to the fair sex, emerged from the embrasure of a window, where he had barricaded himself behind his aunt's arm-chair against the attacks of the eldest Miss Norgood, advanced to meet Miss Harfleur, and led her away, with evident satisfaction, to a retired niche between a rosewood étagière and a rustic flower-stand, where two vacant chairs were placed in most inviting proximity for a *tête-à-tête*.

"My word for it there has been a royal flirtation going on here at no very distant period," said George, as he seated himself with an air of contentment on the chair which he found placed in lover-like contiguity to the one on which he had just disposed his companion; "but you needn't be edging off so," he added, laughing; "the place is not infectious on that account, and I am not going to make love to you."

Ruth laughed, and allowed her chair to remain where it was, though near enough for her to detect the odor of brandy that still tainted George's breath.

"I am afraid," continued George, still in his bantering tone, "that you don't appreciate old acquaintance as you ought. You snubbed me most cruelly the other morning at my uncle's breakfast-table, and, judging from your manner just now, I should say you were not inclined to be more accessible to the fascinations of our clerical friend over yonder," glancing at Æneas, "though I believe you were once a pupil of his reverend father, and must have known him when a child."

"Yes, I am sorry to say I did know him," answered Ruth, casting a look of intense disgust at Æneas; "and, unless appearances are very deceptive, I should say that his manhood has quite fulfilled the promise of his youth."

"Then it is plain you did not regard the promise of his youth as very flattering," replied George, who shared his uncle's opinion with regard to the pious Æneas.

"No, I did not," said Ruth. "We were always at war, and I used to spend half my Saturdays in durance vile, as a punishment for having pulled Æneas's hair or scratched his face."

"But, at any rate, you had the satisfaction of having given him the pull and the scratch," said George, looking as if he would not mind practicing some such little amenities on his own account; "and that must have been a consoling reflection."

Their conversation was interrupted at this point by a little strategic move on the part of Mrs. Plato Plantagenet, who, seeing that Claude had monopolized the attentions of Malvern, and thinking it but fair that her daughter should have a chance at the aristocratic stranger, had taken the first opportunity that offered to remind "dear Claude" that she had promised to give her friends some music. Claude, after first politely exacting the condition that the Miss Norgoods also would favor the company, seated herself at the piano, and rattled off with marvelous ease a long and intricate fantasia of Gottschalk's. After Claude, the eldest Miss Norgood, with a tolerable voice for ballad music, undertook some operatic *morceaux* of so ambitious a style that Ruth herself would have hesitated to attempt them; and then Miss Estremadura Ida Norgood, with no voice at all, followed in a tedious round of those ephemeral popular songs that all sound like variations of one another, and, in virtue of her character as the naughty, giddy thing of the family, she added a few comic ballads, with the necessary ogling and winking at the men to make them effective. The company behaved as people usually do on such occasions,—that is, nobody listened to the music, and everybody went into raptures over it, each performer, as she rose from her seat, being greeted with a lot of conventional compliments from people no one of whom could tell whether she had been playing Yankee Doodle or the Dead March from Saul.

Ruth's musical training was too complete to permit her to talk while any kind of performance was going on, and George was too well bred not to understand the listening attitude she assumed as Claude seated herself at the piano; but he could not repress a gesture of impatience as the first note broke in upon their conversation, and he laid himself back in his easy-chair with a look of suffering endurance so absurd, that Ruth could hardly keep from laughing out. When at last the "giddy thing" had finished her thirteenth ballad, and was complacently receiving the compliments of people who had not heard a word of it, George raised his eyes with a look of inexpressible relief to his companion.

"You don't seem fond of music, Major Dalton," said Ruth, with a smile.

"Yes, I am very fond of *music*," he replied, with emphasis on the word, "but I can't mistake a sparrow for a mockingbird."

"But you ought not to quarrel with the sparrow for not being a mockingbird," she replied.

"Well, I don't," he answered. "If Miss Norgood would never attempt anything above 'Roy's Wife,' or 'Old Folks at Home,' I could listen to her with patience,—even with pleasure. But Claude ought never to touch the piano on any account; she has not a spark of genuine music in her, nor does she value it one straw, except as a graceful and elegant accomplishment. Her music is all in her fingers, and as cold and soulless as the gems upon them. It puts me out of patience to hear her, for you know that mere sleight of hand cannot make music, nor is vanity a legitimate source of inspiration."

Ruth regarded him with surprise. This was precisely the impression Claude's playing had made upon her, and she was startled to find lurking under George's appearance of utter indifference so true

and correct an appreciation of the art that was the joy and delight of her life. She had too much good taste, however, to utter any criticism adverse to another woman, and she was fortunately saved the necessity of making a reply by Claude herself, who, at a hint from Malvern, now approached her sister, towards whom his eyes had frequently wandered during the progress of Claude's fantasia and Miss Norgood's songs. No one in the room except himself was aware of her rare talents, which she had not been invited to display.

"I am sorry," began Claude, laying her hand on the back of George's chair, "to interrupt a *tête-à-tête* that seems so satisfactory to both parties, but you must lay the blame on Colonel Malvern, who has commissioned me to get my sister to sing. Of course you won't refuse, Ruth? He's very anxious to hear you, but couldn't get away from old Mrs. Norgood," in a cautious whisper, "to ask you himself; come."

"Don't go," said George, before Ruth could answer a word, and he put out his hand as if to detain her.

"Never mind George," said Claude, "he is selfish enough to want to keep you here all the evening, talking to him."

"That is paying me rather an equivocal compliment; it is as much as to say that Major Dalton doesn't want to hear me sing."

"I don't,—not now," said George, with something, though, in his manner that quite relieved the words of their seeming rudeness.

"George, you have no more appreciation of music than a stone," said Claude, pouting.

Ruth looked at him with a quiet smile.

"You will not do me such injustice as to believe that, I know," he said, returning her smile.

"Whatever I believe," said Ruth, her face lighting with a delicious sense of coming triumph, "it is evident that you think I am less of a bore here than I would be at the piano."

"No," said George, "I know that your music is above all criticism, or I would never have ventured an objection to your singing under any circumstances. Malvern has been raving to me about your voice, and he is a man of even more fastidious taste in such matters than myself; but for all that, please don't sing; not now."

"Don't listen to that barbarian, Miss Harfleur," said a voice close to her ear, and, raising her eyes, Ruth saw Audley Malvern's handsome face bending over her. "You surely will not deprive all this honorable company of the pleasure of hearing you sing just to gratify the whim of a selfish dog who wants to keep you all to himself. Come, George," he continued, as he placed Ruth's unresisting hand on his arm and led her towards the piano, "pocket your absurdity for once, and come and enjoy Miss Harfleur's music like a sensible man."

George rose and followed them, with a discontented look. He stationed himself at one end of the piano, with his hands stuck moodily in his pockets and his eyes fixed upon the singer. Ruth took her seat quietly and without ostentation, but could not forbear one little glance of anticipated triumph towards George, as she thought how soon she would compel homage even from him. She did not choose any difficult masterpiece to show off her voice, but struck a few simple chords, and then, without once clearing her throat or declaring that she had a cold, began that sweet, sad song, "Rock me to Sleep."

The strain was neither new nor rare, but the voice of the singer was both. The exquisite expression that the overflowing heart of the motherless exile threw into her song, even more than her wonderful voice, entranced every hearer. The subdued hum of conversation, which is all that society usually concedes to art when they meet in a drawing-room, suddenly hushed to a dead silence as the first accents of Miss Harfleur's bird-like notes floated through the room. Even Mr. Harfleur's face grew softer, and good Aunt Bruen stealthily wiped away a tear.

When she rose from the piano, a confused murmur of applause ran through the room; but before any one could address a word to the singer, and before she herself well knew what he was about, George had taken her on his arm, and led her from the room.

"You have given me, Miss Harfleur, against my will, one of the greatest pleasures I ever had in my life," he said, as he led her through the hall out on the moonlit piazza, "and I am going to repay the debt by saving you from the platitudes those people in yonder are all ready to let fly at you."

Ruth regarded him with a half-amused, half-puzzled expression. "May I ask," she said, "since you admit that my music pleased you, why you did not wish to hear me sing?"

"Precisely because I knew it would please me," he answered; "and when I listen to music,—I mean the genuine thing, not the stuff that passes current for it in society,—I want to give up my whole soul to the enjoyment of it. I did not wish to hear you sing for the first time in a crowd, where I would be condemned to witness Mrs. Norgood's paroxysms of admiration, and where I would be set down as little better than a cannibal if I didn't wake from my trance of enjoyment at the end of every strain to make a pretty speech and assure you of my appreciation. I preferred waiting until there were no profane listeners at hand to desecrate the charm of your music with unmeaning applause. I was afraid to trust myself, lest I should look savage every time Miss Norgood exclaimed 'How beautiful!' in the wrong place, or fly at old Plato Plantagenet's throat when he began to tell, as he always does, about the time when his stepbrother's wife's cousin's sister-in-law, Mrs. Major-General Swashbluster, was taken for Piccolomini."

Ruth laughed. "I understand you," she said, "and I heartily thank you for your thorough appreciation of the art that has been almost my only pleasure in life; but," she continued, pausing as they reached the farther end of the piazza and resting one hand on the railing, "don't you think you are a little too exacting upon the appreciativeness of others? According to your notions, one could not enjoy the opera on account of the people who go there to show themselves rather than listen to the music."

"Not at all," said George; "if they will only hold their tongues while the music is going on and let those listen who will. But in a private parlor you have to be polite to every officious connoisseur who interrupts you in the midst of a strain to tell you how divine it is, and must listen with patience at the end of every piece to the stereotyped applauses of people who don't know Mozart from Offenbach. Half the people in society have no more real love of music than my walking-stick, but they talk it up and fly into raptures over it because they've got a notion that that is the genteel thing to do. They will talk to you throughout the most *recherché* performance about their personal ailments and adventures, as if you were more interested in the state of their nerves, or the history of their last flirtation, than in the music, and then expect you to think them lovers of art because they exclaim 'Very fine' at the end of a piece, not one note of which they have heard. In public places of amusement such people are compelled by public opinion to hold their tongues during a performance, and they cannot become aggressive; but until the manners of our best society improve in this respect I shall never desire to hear even you sing, Miss Harfleur, in a crowded drawing-room. But I must stop grumbling," he added, looking into her face with a pleasant smile, "or you will take me for a growling, discontented cynic, and I confess I would be very sorry for your first impression of me to be a disagreeable one."

There was an honest straightforwardness about George Dalton that was contagious with ingenuous natures like his own. Ruth liked him, and could not help telling him so.

"It would be worse than ungrateful in me to call you disagreeable," she said, "since you are the only gentleman in the house who has taken any notice of me; and as for your grumbling," she added, with a laugh, "it is not of a kind to make me afraid, for I know that you are not ill-natured."

"Thank you for saying so," replied George; "I was afraid I had been a little ill-natured; indeed, I have not felt in a pleasant mood since—since I heard something the other night that has put me out of sorts with all the world, and almost made me lose my faith in human nature."

He broke a spray from the yellow jessamine-vine that clustered over their heads and crushed it nervously in his hand.

"But I am glad," he went on, stifling the bitter words that the thought of Julia Malvern's treachery had almost brought to his lips, "that you are not disposed to be hard on me, for I like you, Miss Harfleur, and want you to be my friend if you will."

"Friendship has not been lavished upon me so freely, Major Dalton, that I can afford to reject it when so frankly offered," said Ruth, placing her hand in the broad, generous palm that George extended to her.

"Major Dalton," said George, repeating the words slowly, while he still retained the hand Ruth had placed in his,—"Major Dalton, Miss Harfleur,—can't we manage to get rid of those formidable titles? They act like a refrigerator upon friendly intercourse. We are half-cousins anyhow, you know; that is," he added, feeling that the vulgarity of

claiming kin on short notice does not apply in cases where the originator of the claim occupies the position of advantage, "the connection between our families is such as to warrant us in claiming kin if we like each other well enough. Claude and I are on such terms of cousinship as to quarrel with one another whenever we feel disposed. Why can't you and I, who mean to be such good friends, make use of the family connection to get rid of ceremony and be plain Ruth and George to each other? Do you like me well enough to call me George?"

"Yes, I do, George," she answered, returning his cordial smile with a look of hearty good will.

Can you tell me, O sage reader, why it was that the very same thing which had seemed to Ruth an unwarrantable liberty, an insult almost, when suggested by the pious Æneas Tadpole, should seem the most natural and agreeable thing in the world when proposed by the profligate George Dalton?

CHAPTER XX.

ÆNEAS FALLS INTO THE HANDS OF THE PHILISTINES.

The day of the tournament was to South Ambury what Derby day is to London, or Mardi Gras to New Orleans. There was not a young woman for twenty miles around whose brain had not been filled for weeks past with visions of gallant knights and prancing steeds, with a floral crown in the distance, adorning perchance her own fair brow; and light feet had pattered in their sleep for many a night to the phantom music that floated through dreams of the coming tournament ball.

The scene of the mimic contest was a place called Sandy Circle, about three miles from South Ambury; and towards this point the entire population of the district for miles around were wending their way on the morning of the tournament. Troops of happy negroes enlivened every highway and by-way with their holiday faces and bright bandanas, while the gentry of the neighborhood, decked in their best, rolled grandly along in their cumbersome family coaches, or cantered lightly by on their graceful thorough-bred steeds.

The young people at the White House had all decided to ride over to the Circle on horseback. The distance was twelve miles,—just a pleasant morning's ride;—and after the tournament they were all to proceed to South Ambury, where the two Miss Harfleurs, with Major Dalton and Colonel Malvern, were to remain as the guests of Mrs. Stockdale, and attend the tournament ball.

Ruth had never learned to ride, and it was with a feeling of secret chagrin that she made her appearance on the morning of the tournament in an ordinary carriage-dress, while all the other ladies, except her aunt and Mrs. Norgood, were equipped for riding. She regretted this defect of her city education the more, as it seemed likely to entail upon her the companionship of Mr. Æneas Tadpole, he being the only gentleman of the party who was not addicted to equestrian pursuits, and he had shown a determined disposition to thrust himself upon her in spite of her studied coldness. She could not cut him outright, or resort to open rudeness, so long as he was a guest in her father's house, and nothing short of a positive affront seemed likely to affect him. Mr. Æneas Tadpole was one of those men who never perceive a slight, unless it suits their purpose, and it apparently did not suit his purpose to take offense at Ruth. From their very first meeting she had taken no pains to conceal her dislike, and had clearly indicated her desire to avoid him, but Mr. Tadpole perseveringly refused to be avoided. He was constantly skulking at her side whenever there was an opportunity of forcing himself upon her, and on the morning of the tournament he observed her carriage-dress with a look of intense satisfaction, and hung about her with the evident intention of ensconcing himself in the same vehicle. George Dalton had ridden over to Sandowne the evening before, promising to return early in the morning, or to join the rest of the party somewhere along the road. As he had not yet made his appearance, and the other gentlemen were all booted and spurred for riding, Mr. Tadpole made no doubt that he could accomplish his object without a rival. He did not directly ask permission to act as Ruth's escort, which might have given her an opportunity to put him off on some pretext or other, but officiously took upon himself to act in that capacity with an air of taking the matter for granted, which left Ruth no resource short of a downright snubbing,

which one is loth to administer even in the most flagrant and aggravated cases of pushing.

There was another person to whom these demonstrations of Mr. Tadpole were as unwelcome as to Ruth herself, and that person was Julian Harfleur. Whenever Mr. Tadpole approached Ruth Mr. Harfleur always happened, somehow or other, to be very near at hand, so near that it would have been impossible for him, whatever scruples he may have entertained on the subject, not to overhear everything that passed between them. If Mr. Harfleur had been a manœuvring mamma, bent upon entangling that model young man into some carefully-laid matrimonial snare, he could not have kept a more jealous eye upon him; nay, the glance of jealousy itself could not have been half so vigilant and penetrating as the dark eye of suspicion which Julian Harfleur kept fixed upon the son of his friend.

Mr. Harfleur had never volunteered a word to Ruth since their interview in the garden, and she was therefore greatly surprised when he approached her, as she was leaving the breakfast-room on the morning of the tournament, and inquired, in a pleasant voice, why she was not dressed for riding, like the other ladies.

Ruth was obliged, to her great mortification, to acknowledge that she had never been on horseback in her life.

"That is a pity," said her father, for once in his life speaking sincerely; "but you will soon learn, here in the country. And you, my dear Tadpole," turning to Æneas, who was following close behind, "what do you propose doing?"

"I guess I sha'n't ride to-day," said Æneas, shuddering at the very idea, for he had delicate nerves, as became a nice young clergyman fond of being petted by maiden ladies and middle-aged widows. "The duties of a minister of the gospel being of a moral and intellectual nature, do not tend, you know, to proficiency in mere physical accomplishments; and those of our class who devote themselves conscientiously to the duties of their sacred calling have neither time nor inclination for grosser athletic pursuits."

"Still, you do not consider such pursuits essentially wrong, I hope," said Mr. Harfleur, with an air of the greatest deference, "nor really consider, as I once heard you maintain in an argument with Claude, that tournaments are so nearly allied to circuses and horse-races, and other abominations of Satan, as to be included in the same category? Because, if you really are doubtful of the morality of the tournament, of course you would not like to give it the sanction of your presence, and it would be a very great disappointment to all of us not to have you of our party to-day."

Æneas did not perceive the sarcastic smile that lurked under Mr. Harfleur's iron-gray moustache, as he called to mind, so inopportunely, the moral sentiments that had been advanced to suit a very different occasion. The pious Æneas looked uncomfortable, cleared his throat, coughed a little dry cough behind his hand, and then began,—

"It is true, I cannot approve of such entertainments from a moral point of view, nor do I think a minister of the gospel would be justified in seeking amusement at them; but I am not going for my own pleasure. I am told that persons are often severely, sometimes fatally, hurt in these vicious sports, and it is the duty of a minister of the gospel never to shrink from danger,—eh, Miss Harfleur? We should always be at hand to render spiritual aid and consolation in case of need. If any of the riders should be hurt, it would be very convenient to have a minister of the gospel on the spot."

"How very considerate! I had not thought of your sacrificing your own feelings in that way, my dear Æneas," said Mr. Harfleur, turning away to hide the sneer that curled the very tips of his moustache; "and I suppose we may also depend upon you to help look after the ladies in case there should be any trouble with the horses?"

"Y-e-e-e-s, of course," drawled Æneas, looking uneasy, for the mention of horses always made him nervous; "though I, ahem, don't like riding, you know, and since I find Miss Ruthie in the same category, I suppose we shall have to keep one another in countenance, and find consolation in each other's society for the pleasure we may lose by our want of skill in the saddle, he! he! he!"

Ruth did not dare to hint what poor consolation that would be to her, for fear of offending her father. His manner was so enigmatical that she could not tell what were his real feelings towards Æneas Tadpole. She thought she detected a bitter irony lurking under his show of deference, but it was so covert, so secret, so deep, that she could hardly say whether it were really there or whether her own contempt for Æneas merely made

her fancy so. In the uncertainty she judged it best to swallow her disgust and say nothing, as the course least likely in any case to displease her father, whom she feared as much as she detested Æneas. Mr. Harfleur answered for her,—

"Oh, yes, certainly," he said, with a bland smile; "we'll arrange all that. I am to go with Mrs. Norgood in the pony phaeton, so I'll resign to you my brett with Pasha and Emir. You'll have the best turnout in the crowd. I've just been to the stables, and the thorough-breds are in splendid condition; I'll go and order them out for you."

The pious Æneas turned pale. The idea of driving himself would have upset his nerves under any circumstances, and he had seen those fiery steeds prancing and rearing under their master's hand too often not to know that his own was no match for them. He coughed a little deprecatory cough, but before he could begin a remonstrance his solicitous host had left the room.

A few minutes afterwards he appeared at the stable-door, and surprised the busy grooms within by ordering Pasha and Emir to be harnessed to the brett. They were two fiery, blooded horses not yet fully trained, and so furious and unmanageable that it was not safe to drive them under any circumstances, and sheer madness to trust them to inexperienced hands, especially in a crowd where horses are always inclined to be unruly, and one fractious animal endangers every vehicle near it. Very few people liked to risk their necks behind Pasha and Emir, and no one had ever been trusted with the reins except Mr. Harfleur himself, and the groom who had special charge of them. This boy was in the stable when Mr. Harfleur issued his orders, and though it was a bold undertaking for any man, much less one of his own slaves, to gainsay Julian Harfleur, the cautious groom ventured a feeble remonstrance.

"You see, massa, dey ain't been druv now for three days hand-runnin', and dey be unusual peert like," he said, taking off his hat and cowering humbly before the stern figure of his master. "It 'ud be dangersome for to drive 'em 'long wi' all dem t'other hosses, and might make dem ladies oneas——"

"Hold your impudent tongue, and do as I bid you," was all the poor darkey got for his pains. Before he had time to do more than draw out the brett, Mr. Harfleur suddenly bethought him of some urgent business he had with a neighbor, and dispatched the groom to the plantation of the latter, five miles distant. Then, calling to his assistance a half-grown boy that Derry, the groom, had in training, he proceeded to harness the horses himself. He was very particular in examining every strap and buckle, and was especially careful about one of the reins, which he said had got a little out of order. When he drove round to the front gate the rest of the party were just starting off, and only Mrs. Norgood, Ruth, and the pious Æneas were left standing on the piazza. Mr. Harfleur hastened to assist Mrs. Norgood into the phaeton, with a polite apology for his own tardiness, then turning to Æneas,—

"Now, my dear Tadpole," said he, "you and Ruth are to have the honor of riding behind my blooded steeds to-day. You must not feel too highly complimented though," he added, jocularly, "for I only let you have them because all the other horses are in use. You must keep a steady hand, Æneas: they are always disposed to be a little frisky when they first start."

Mr. Tadpole did not appear very sensible to the honor conferred upon him. He glanced uneasily at the splendid animals as they stood impatiently pawing the ground, taxing the utmost strength of the two grooms who had them in charge to hold them back.

"Don't you think, Mr. Harfleur," he protested, rubbing his hands nervously together, "that they are too unsafe to—a—hem—to trust a lady behind them? I am not uneasy on my own account, but for Miss Ruthie; would it be lawful to risk her life?"

"Oh, I am not a bit afraid," said Ruth, suspecting at once the true state of the case, and losing all sense of danger to herself in the pleasure of worrying Æneas; "I like spirited horses." And, with the temerity of ignorance, she stepped up to Emir, and reached out her hand to pat him on the neck. The animal made a plunge that sent the groom who held him on a somersault across the road, and surprised the pious Æneas into a most unclerical leap into the air. Strange to say, Ruth received not the slightest detriment, and seemed half inclined to repeat the experiment for Mr. Tadpole's benefit, as soon as her father succeeded in again quieting the horses.

"You see now how dangerous they are, Miss Ruthie," gasped Æneas, trembling in every limb. "It would be tempting Providence to trust yourself behind such

untamed creatures. I would not mind it on my own account, but it is my duty, as a minister of the gospel, to hold the lives of my fellow-creatures dear; and—o—h, Miss Ruthie——" The horses had made another plunge, and he actually clung to her dress in terror.

Ruth was not of a timid disposition, and, supposing one of the grooms would drive, who of course knew all about the horses, she did not concern herself about Æneas's inefficiency. She was too ignorant of such matters to appreciate the danger she was incurring, and even if she had been fully sensible of it, the pleasure of tormenting Æneas would have gone far towards compensating this malicious young woman for the prospect of getting her own neck broken.

"Don't disturb yourself on my account, Mr. Tadpole," she said. "I am not at all alarmed; there, they are getting quiet now; we had better jump in before they start again."

Seeing there was no help in that quarter, he turned to Mr. Harfleur and said, in an appealing tone,—

"You'll drive us yourself, I guess?"

"Why, no," answered Mr. Harfleur, in his pleasant, humorous way. "That would spoil the *tête-à-tête*, you know; two's company, three's a crowd,—ha! ha! ha! and, besides, I could not leave Mrs. Norgood alone; but, if you don't like the trouble of driving, Davy there can take the reins; managing such horses as these is a sad check to conversation. Up, there, Davy, and take the lines."

There was no help for it now, except to back square out, and leave Miss Harfleur to risk her neck alone,—a course from which there were, as Mr. Harfleur suspected, stronger motives than mere worldly pride to deter this exalted soul; so, with a face as white as a sheet and a spirit full of terrible forebodings, he held out his cold, trembling hand to assist Ruth into the vehicle, when another hand suddenly thrust it aside, and George Dalton interposed.

"Good heavens! Mr. Harfleur," he exclaimed, seizing Ruth by the arm and drawing her away from the brett, "you certainly are not going to let anybody risk their necks behind those savage brutes; with Davy to drive, too! It's downright homicide."

Mr. Harfleur changed color as George uttered the word.

"I must say," he replied, with an air of frankness, "that I did not like their risking the horses myself, but there was nothing else left in the stable. That cavalry troop yonder has got everything that can move under the saddle; and, unluckily, Derry has gone off to Mr. Ridgeley's, and won't be back under two hours."

"In that case," said George, "with your permission and Miss Harfleur's, I will drive her myself."

Mr. Harfleur scanned George's face narrowly, and a furtive smile played round his lips, as he read there the traces of a wild night's debauch.

"Certainly, George; I shall be greatly obliged to you," was his gracious reply. "Pasha and Emir will be as safe as a pair of hobby-horses under your experienced hand. There, my dear Tadpole, you have no cause of anxiety now, with such a famous whip as Major Dalton to hold the lines for you."

Mr. Tadpole's countenance, which had brightened visibly on George's first interference, now fell again, and Mr. Harfleur's assurance seemed to him anything but reassuring, as he remembered George's habitual intemperance, and conjured up awful pictures in his mind of the direful consequences that might result from the fury of a pair of ungovernable coursers in the reckless hands of a drunken man. He knew the wild, dare-devil spirit that possessed George in his fits of intoxication, which were, alas! of very frequent occurrence, and he thought, as he observed the young man's face more closely, that he detected signs of recent hard drinking. Instead of abating his anxiety, George's presence, in this condition, only increased his terrors, and it seemed to the unlucky Æneas that all the powers of darkness were conspiring against him. He took advantage of the moment's delay, while George was examining the harness, to suggest to Mr. Harfleur that Major Dalton's condition was, a—hem, a—hem, a little too, a—too intoxicated for him to be trusted where a lady was concerned.

"It is our duty, you know, to consider the safety of the ladies, even where they do not consider it themselves."

And, indeed, if the alacrity with which Ruth had acceded to Major Dalton's proposition may be taken as a test, she showed very little regard, indeed, to her own safety.

"Dalton is all right," said Mr. Harfleur, with a sinister look in his eye that gave a double meaning to the words; and, before Æneas could say more, he was interrupted by a sudden exclamation from the object of his terrors:

"Good gracious, the whole thing is out of order!" cried George, giving the lines an impatient jerk. "It would be as much as our lives are worth to start off in this trim: the right trace there is too short, the martingales are too tight, and I'll be hanged if some fool hasn't gone and tied the left rein with a bit of flimsy cotton string! Davy, you rascal, where's the buckle to this rein? Quick, you dog!"

Mr. Harfleur reddened a little at the unceremonious epithet applied so unconsciously to his own handiwork, but expressed surprise that the harness should have been put on in so slovenly a fashion, and helped George make things right.

"Now," said George, gathering up the reins after he had thoroughly inspected every seam and buckle, "we are all tight and fast. Get on my filly, Davy, and ride behind, to take the horses when we reach Sandy Circle. Come, Ruth, get in now, up there on the front seat by me. Here, Mr. Tadpole, in with you." And before Æneas could utter a remonstrance he found himself doubled up on the back seat of the brett, which he had all to himself, with ample leisure to contemplate the backs of his companions and reflect on the horrors of the situation. In another moment George had sprung into his place, and away they went like wildfire. The rapidity of the motion and excess of his fear almost took Æneas's breath away, so that for the first mile or two he could only sit huddled up where George had placed him, clinging to the back of the vehicle to steady himself, and uttering secret ejaculations to heaven with more sincerity and fervor than he had ever prayed before.

George and Ruth were pretty well aware of the state of his feelings, which caused those profane and impious young persons to cast frequent glances behind them in intense enjoyment of his misery.

"Isn't this delightful, Mr. Tadpole?" said Ruth, maliciously, after they had gone a mile or two.

"Oh, ah, y-e-e-e-s, very noice, Miss Ruthie," faltered Æneas, with a ghastly smile, while the cold sweat oozed from every pore and stood in glistening drops on his pale, cadaverous face; "but don't you think——"

The unfinished sentence terminated in an irrepressible groan, as a sudden turn in their course nearly whirled Æneas off his seat, and brought to view at the same time still greater dangers ahead, where the road ran for nearly a mile close along the river's edge, in a winding, zigzag course, full of abrupt turns and windings. The banks were unusually high and precipitous just there, while a chain of those bottomless pits called lime-sinks, connected probably by some subterranean channel with the stream, bordered their way on the other side, leaving barely room to pass, and even this was encroached upon in sundry places by the *débris* of fallen pines uprooted by a recent storm. As all these snares and pitfalls unfolded themselves before Æneas's eyes he could no longer contain his fears, but, catching nervously at George's arm, he asked, in a terrified whisper,—

"Is not this a very dangerous place, Major Dalton?"

"Oh, yes," said George, exchanging a look of intelligence with Ruth; "there have been more dreadful accidents just along here than anywhere else within thirty miles of South Ambury. I wouldn't give that," snapping his thumb and forefinger, "for the life of any man who should lose control of his horse in such a place as this. There's a slough not far ahead of us that has encroached upon the road till the lightest vehicle can hardly find room to pass."

"Then hadn't we better go a little slower?" said Æneas, in a quaking voice; "couldn't you drive a little more carefully, Major Dalton?"

"Oh, the faster we go the sooner the danger will be over," returned George, imitating, for Æneas's benefit, the recklessness of his drunken moods; and, suiting his action to the words, he gave the reins more freely.

"Do, Major Dalton," pleaded Æneas, "I entreat you—think of the young lady—for Miss Ruthie's sake——"

"Oh, never mind me, I like it. Can't we go a little faster, George?" said Ruth, mercilessly.

"But it's wrong; we have no right to risk our lives so recklessly," gasped Æneas; "it's my duty as a minister of the gospel to prevent——"

In his desperation he had grasped George's arm, and would have caused him to lose control of the reins if the latter had not instantly hurled him back into his seat, with a violence that sent him reeling among the silken cushions, in the belief that this was the first shock of the general wreck. In addition to his other woes, riding always made Mr. Tadpole "seasick,"—indeed, he had a look of chronic seasickness about him,—and he was obliged now to succumb to the weakness that laid him prostrate on

his cushions, to the great relief of his wicked companions, who were thus virtually rid of his presence.

There was more reason for Mr. Tadpole's fears, just at that moment, than even he, happily for himself, was aware of. In catching hold of George and diverting his attention for an instant from the horses, he had caused him not exactly to lose control of the animals, but allowed them to gain so much the advantage that it was now a drawn battle between them in the struggle for mastery. He held the reins firmly, and still had power to guide their course, but could not check their speed. Ruth saw that something was wrong: she looked into George's face, and knew by the anxious, watchful expression of his eye that there was danger, but that George was not afraid of it, and there was something in his air of calm intrepidity and self-possession that inspired her with a feeling of safety. Courage is as contagious as fear with people who are not constitutionally cowards, and Ruth's strongest impression at this moment of danger was a feeling of unmingled admiration at the masterly way in which George guided his mad team, with scarcely more visible effort than if he were flying a kite. There was no excitement, no fuss, no apparent straining of nerve or muscle, only a watchful eye, keen to detect every danger, and a steady hand to avoid it. One moment they went whirling at a fearful pace round the very brink of some sharp, projecting ledge, grazing the border so narrowly that the sand and pebbles disturbed by their wheels fell with a plash into the river below, while the next minute brought them square abreast of a treacherous lime-sink, where the next step forward would have been to utter destruction but for that adroit pressure upon the reins which turned the horses' heads just in time to escape the raging Charybdis on one hand without falling into the jaws of the yawning Scylla on the other.

There is nothing so captivating to women as that quality in the other sex which exhibits itself in a mastery over horses. However different the two animals may be in other respects, there is this affinity between women and horses—that the same men are usually powerful with both. A man may spell every word in the dictionary wrong, may take all sorts of liberties with English grammar, and may even practice economy in the matter of pocket-handkerchiefs and shirt-collars, without exciting half the contempt among women that they will feel if he makes an awkward figure on horseback. Ruth was not exempt from the common foible of her sex; and when, at the end of a mile or two, the fiery team which George had in hand seemed to grow weary of the struggle, and, recognizing his masterly power, yielded themselves again entirely to his control, her first exclamation was one not of relief, but of admiration.

"Bravo, George!" she cried, as they emerged upon a more open road and he was enabled to relax somewhat his vigilant attention to the lines; "how splendidly you managed it! Why don't you ride at the tournament? I am sure you would carry off all the honors."

"And would you wear the crown if I were to win it for you?" he asked.

Ruth reflected a moment, then answered, very decidedly, "No."

"No; why not?"

"Because," she replied, after a little hesitation, "I think Claude expects to be crowned, and I do not care to appear as my sister's rival in a triumph upon which she has set her heart."

"That is a reason that does credit to your heart, Ruth," said George, with an admiring glance. "I wish other women were like you,—at least, I wish one other was."

"And what other woman do you wish was like me?" asked Ruth, laughing.

"One who might have made a better man of me," said George, bitterly, "if she had chosen; one who could have brought out whatever good there might have been in me, and for whose sake I would have striven and battled against the evil all my life; but she chose rather to blast and ruin my whole future, and make me the miserable drunken dog that you see."

"Drunken! oh, George!" And Ruth fixed upon him a look full of reproach. George smiled a bitter smile.

"Don't be frightened at me," he said, reining in the horses, that were still dashing along at a break-neck speed, to a more moderate pace. "I am as sober as a judge now, and I mean to be so all day. I'm not so far gone yet but I can keep from getting drunk when I have a lady under my charge."

"It was not myself I was thinking of, George," she replied, "but you."

"Me? I'm not worth thinking of at all, Ruth," he answered, sadly. "When I remember what I am, it seems like profanation almost to ask for your confi-

dence, but I can't help it. There are not many people whose friendship I care for, but I feel already as if I could not well do without yours, and I like to be near you, though, I must confess, I never entertain so uncomfortable an opinion of myself as when in your presence; perhaps because it's only then that I really care to be something different from what I am. So you see, if you cannot make me good, Ruth, you can at least make me uncomfortable in being bad."

"Then I hope you are not quite so bad as you call yourself, George," Ruth answered, cheerfully; "and since you give me credit for so much, I wish I could persuade you to leave off altogether the vice that is——"

"Too late, too late for that now," interrupted George, gloomily, shaking his head. "If you had been my sister, if I had known you before I met *her*, you might have saved me; but what does it matter now? When the only woman a man ever has loved or ever can love has basely deceived and trifled with him, has trampled under foot all the nobler instincts of his nature, what is left him but to follow in the path she has opened, and go to the dogs as fast as he can?"

"And justify her treatment of him," said Ruth. "A man of your sense ought to reason better than that, George."

"Reason! Ha! ha!" laughed George, bitterly. "You don't know how little reason has to do with these things, Ruth. You don't know——" he paused a moment, then added, abruptly, "but you do know my friend Malvern?"

Ruth gave a sudden start, and crimsoned to the very roots of her hair, at this abrupt mention of a name that seemed to have so little connection with what they were talking about. Had he done it designedly, or—and her heart beat violently at the thought—had the fascinations of his friend been the fatal cause of poor George's disappointment?

Ruth's involuntary betrayal of emotion did not escape her companion; but whatever he may have divined as to its true cause, he was not a man to make an ungenerous use of the knowledge. He regarded her for one moment with a sad, quiet smile that seemed like the reflection of a sigh, then generously turned his eyes away, and proceeded with what he had been saying.

"You know my friend Malvern, I was going to say, well enough, no doubt, to have observed the rare attractions of person and manner with which he is endowed, and can figure to yourself, perhaps, the empire he might establish over any woman who should be so fortunate as to fix his somewhat unstable affections. Well," he went on, after a short pause, "Malvern has a sister who is even more richly endowed with all the graces of her sex than he is with those of his,—at least I thought so once."

Ruth breathed more freely. "I have seen her picture," she said; "she is very like her brother."

"Yes; not so strikingly handsome, perhaps; at least I don't remember that her face appeared to me, at first, so particularly beautiful; I wish to heaven I had never learned to think it so!" He turned away, and pressed his hand nervously to his brow. It was some moments before he resumed.

"I am not a very susceptible man, as you may judge, Ruth; and although I was twenty-eight years old when I first met her, Julia Malvern was the first and only woman that I have ever loved. It was only when I thought myself loved by her that I felt inspired to shake off the natural indolence of my disposition and exercise the capabilities that lay dormant within me. With the love of that woman I would have become something as different from what I am as my best friend could wish me. If I had never met her I should be no worse than nature made me; now I am what the hand of a faithless woman has left me."

Ruth was too ignorant of the world to know how prone men are to lay their vices at the door of women who have slighted their affections; and besides her natural interest in a love-story, of which Audley Malvern's sister was the heroine, she was moved by a woman's native impulse to soothe and comfort. Laying her hand gently on George's arm, she said, in a hopeful, cheering voice,—

"Don't despair yet, George; women are not always as heartless as they seem. You have had some little quarrel with this Miss Malvern, which you have both magnified and embittered with the usual unreasonableness of lovers. I imagine that you can be very obstinate and uncompromising, George, when you choose; and I should judge from her picture that Miss Malvern is a haughty, unyielding woman; and so, between you, you have made a sad business of some trifle that nobody else would have thought worth quarreling about,—and love is so jealous and exacting. But never mind; Claude has invited her to the White House, you

know, and if she comes, there will be opportunities for explanations and elucidations that you don't dream of now; and, in short, I shouldn't wonder if before six months are over I have to resign all my claims upon your notice to the superior rights of Mrs. Julia Dalton."

"Never!" cried George, impetuously; "don't link my name with hers, even in fancy, Ruth. If she had only been faithless to me,—if she had not been false to her own heart,—I might forgive her; but when a woman like Julia Malvern—not a poor little fool that don't know any better, but a magnificent, peerless creature like Julia—deliberately weighs the most sacred feelings of her nature in the balance with a blockhead's gold; when she calmly chooses between the man she loves and the treasure of a man she despises,—rejecting the love for the money,—what excuse is there for her, and what can the man do who respects himself but detest and despise her? If she were fickle she would perhaps be only what other women are; but Julia is not that. I believe she loves me at this moment as well as she did when—when I believed her love worth having; and that is why I hate her so. Make her my wife? If she were at my feet this minute, I'd——"

He did not finish the sentence, but, setting his teeth firmly together, drove on for some time in silence. There was something terrible in his look, and Ruth shrank away from him, startled at the strength of passion he displayed. She did not know what to say, so waited for him to resume, which he did presently, in a calmer tone.

"She didn't know that I was rich then; I didn't know it myself, for my uncle had not as yet definitely settled his property in my favor. I knew that I had expectations, but somehow I never thought much about them one way or another. I never cared about money for its own sake, and laid so little stress upon my expectations that I did not even think to tell Julia that I had a rich uncle. But she was rich herself then, and would have to sacrifice nothing in taking me; only her father was loath to give her up to a roving army man, and insisted that she should wait to be married till she was twenty-five. In the mean time the war broke out, and the Malverns were among the very first victims. You know the story,—it made a great sensation at the time; her father was an invalid, and died of that night's work, and the rest of them were exposed to intolerable hardships. Poor Julia!" he sighed, in spite of himself.

"As soon as I heard of her misfortunes I hastened to her, and on the way received the letter from my uncle in which he stated definitely his intention of making me his heir, and urged me to come home, that he might settle the business. Then, for the first time in my life, I began to think something of my prospects. I formed a delightful little plan for surprising Julia. I would not tell her I was going to be rich; I could not rob myself of even that poor test of her affection. I exulted in the thought that she loved me for myself alone. She should marry me, the poor lieutenant, with nothing but his love to offer, and then I would take her home, and my uncle might bestow his millions upon her if he chose; I did not want them for myself. Night and day my brain was busy with thoughts of all I would do to make Julia happy. But what was the end of my dreams? She broke with me outright, because she had lost her money, and I was, she said, too poor to marry her without it; and she uttered a lot of stuff to the same effect that she had picked up from worldly old women, and I'd have died then rather than tell her better, though my uncle's letter was in my pocket. I had never cared for her money, and, by heaven! no woman shall ever marry me for mine! The sort of thing that can be had for hire is not the love a man wants to marry for. I was angry, and said something of that sort to her, and then she fired up like a meteor. Great heaven! how she did blaze forth at me, and how magnificent she looked in her anger! It maddened me to fury. I have got the dev—I mean the, a—an awful temper myself, when I am roused,—and I was thoroughly roused then,—and I don't know what I said, but it made a breach between us that can never be healed. She has been fooling ever since with every rich blockhead that comes in her way, intent upon repairing her damaged fortunes, I presume; but whether none of them could offer inducements sufficient to gratify her insatiable ambition, whether the memory of better things still held her back, she trifled with them all, until old General Bagpipe, the most infamous old dolt in the whole army, lays his purse and honors at her feet; and Audley tells me she is actually going to marry him,—a broken-down old debauchee; an ill-favored,

disgusting, purse-proud old fool,—thus proving herself too utterly base and mercenary for the respect, much less the love, of any decent man. Ah, Ruth, can you blame me for being what I am, when Julia Malvern has made herself what she is?"

"She may have done wrong, George, I grant," said Ruth, "but that does not excuse you for doing yourself a greater wrong."

"Perhaps not; but it is too late now ever to undo the wrong. Forgive me if I have talked too much about myself; the strongest of us will sometimes be weak enough to talk about our own sufferings; but I cannot try your patience longer, for here we are at the tournament-ground."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TOURNAMENT.

The tilting-ground of the South Ambury chivalry was an ancient lake-bed about three miles from the town, called, on account of its rounded outline and powdery surface, the Sandy Circle. It was a large open basin, bearing no trace of vegetation, but covered all over with sand of such dazzling whiteness as almost blinded the eyes to look upon it. This coat of snowy brightness ceased abruptly at the margin of the lake-bed, where the wood-fern and wire-grass resumed their sway. The line of demarkation was still further defined by a ring of majestic live-oaks that once laved their pendent branches in the waters of the limpid lake. They extended in an unbroken circle entirely round the basin, forming the most attractive feature of this remarkable spot, with their stately heads still slightly bent towards the place of the vanished waters, while the long gray moss-wreaths that hung from every bough trailed upon the thirsty margin, and, swayed by the wind, left fantastic traceries on the barren sand.

The surface of the basin sloped gently towards the centre, where there was a level space some thirty yards or more in diameter, kept slightly moist in winter by the constant percolation of rain-water through the soil. There was just enough moisture in ordinary seasons to render the sand firm and compact, so as to afford a good footing for horses, while the sloping sides of the basin formed a natural amphitheatre of more majestic proportions than the Roman Colosseum.

Just outside the basin, on the east, the ground suddenly fell in a deep hollow or ravine, at the bottom of which, gushing from under a ridge of earth which walls in the deserted lake-bed on that side, burst forth one of the most magnificent blue springs to be seen in all the Southern country. There is a tradition derived from the aborigines that the blue spring did not exist contemporaneously with the lake, but broke out at the time of its disappearance. The waters have never been fathomed at their source, owing to the violence with which they rush upward, but a few rods below they measure over a hundred and twenty feet, and if cleared of the cypress-knees and other swamp growth that cumber their channel, would float a small-sized steamer up to the very spot where they come seething from the bowels of the earth. Though tinged with the beautiful azure hue from which these limestone springs derive their name, they are so clear that you can count the pebbles on the bottom, or number the scales of the tiniest fishes that float through their limpid waves. Every object viewed through this enchanted medium seems tinted with a kind of rainbow hue, and the great ledges of limestone through which the current forces its way upward sparkle like a wall of gems. The waters seem to be urged onward by some powerful force, for they come surging and boiling to the light in a huge jet, that flings itself aloft with such violence as to dash aside heavy stones and billets of wood when cast upon them. The escape of this wonderful stream from its subterranean prison is accompanied by a curious gurgling sound, that deepens at intervals into a prolonged roll, like the echo of a human groan way down in the depths of the earth, whence its Indian name, Tongateeska, the sighing stream, more commonly called Taiha's Fountain, from the Indian legend connected with the spot.

In the olden time, before the Petaulas had been driven from their hunting-grounds by the powerful Muscogees, the beautiful princess Taiha used to meet her lover, Kiolaskee, a young Muscogee chief, in the secret dell on the eastern side of the lake. Owando, her father, who wanted Taiha to marry the powerful old chief of the Seminoles, was very angry when he found that his daughter was secretly encouraging the addresses of his enemy, but not daring to meet the bold young warrior

in open combat, treacherously waylaid him, and had his murdered body flung into the lake. The Great Spirit, in punishment of Owando's crime, dried up the waters of the lake, whence the name, Ghesnee Gwavissa,—vanished water,—afterwards changed by the pale-faced intruders into the prosaic Anglo-Saxon of Sandy Circle.

Taiha, when she found that her lover was murdered, used to go every day to the trysting-place to weep for him and bewail her approaching nuptials with the Seminole, which cruel Owando was determined to force upon her, till at last, on the day before the wedding, the earth suddenly gave way beneath her feet as she stood weeping for Keolaskee, and the waters of the Tongateeska gushed out, engulfing poor Taiha forever beneath their crystal waves, where, it is said, she still sits weeping at the source of the fountain, and the sound of her lamentations is borne upward on the waters.

The road by which George had driven made half the circuit of the ancient lake-bed, and crossed the creek, or rather river, that issues from Taiha's Fountain, before reaching the grand entrance to the tilting-ground. As the horses' feet struck the first planks of the somewhat dilapidated wooden bridge that spanned the current, Ruth, catching her first glimpse of the sapphire waters, uttered a cry of delight, and begged George to stop and let her gaze on the glorious spectacle. Her sudden exclamation roused Æneas from the state of collapse into which the dizziness and nausea produced by the unwonted motions and emotions of the last few hours had plunged him; he heard the clatter of the horses' hoofs upon the bridge, he heard the rushing of water, he heard Miss Harfleur's sudden cry, and, interpreting everything according to his fears, he gave up all for lost, and uttered a groan so dismal that Ruth looked round in alarm, and George growled between his teeth, "Confound the fool, what ails him now?"

Even when the vehicle stopped, he was not quite sure, at first, but they were all at the bottom of the watery grave he had been dreading so long; but when he comprehended the real state of the case, he took such eager advantage of the opportunity that he had rolled himself out of the brett, and was clinging to the railing of the bridge, before anybody else had time to stir.

For once in her life Ruth seemed inclined to follow Æneas Tadpole, and George, calling Davy to hold the horses, helped her out of the brett, and led her down to the brink of the wonderful fountain. Ruth's artistic eye took in at a glance all the beauties of the scene. The sloping sides of the ravine through which Taiha's Fountain poured its waters were shaded by tall magnolias, and carpeted with moss and ferns. From the margin of the stream gigantic cypresses shot up towards the sky, their lofty heads crowned with tufts of brown leaves, and veiled in gray moss-wreaths, while huge aquatic vines hugged their mighty trunks like anacondas coiling round their prey. A little way down the stream, a family of turtles were lazily sunning themselves on a log, and still farther, where the channel began to widen into a vast cane-brake, stood a solitary crane on a decayed cypress stump, looking the very picture of loneliness and isolation.

If George's sense of the picturesque was less profoundly moved by a scene that was so familiar to him, he did not disturb Ruth's enjoyment of it by ill-timed or impertinent observations. There is something in the grander works of nature that imposes silence, even upon the most heedless; language seems as impertinent as it is impotent in the presence of God's great works, and the highest tribute that can be paid to any monument, whether of nature or of art, is the eloquent applause of silence.

In the mean time, Mr. Tadpole, having recovered somewhat from the effects of his ride, rejoined his companions, and proceeded conscientiously to make himself agreeable. He slunk up close to Miss Harfleur's side, cleared his throat, coughed two or three times by way of introduction, and then observed, with due gravity,—

"A truly magnificent spectacle, Miss Ruthie. Do you feel that your spirit partakes of the exaltation of the scene?"

Ruth turned away impatiently without deigning any response. George turned his head slightly and growled "Umph!"

The pious Æneas, taking this for encouragement, addressed his next remark, which was of a more practical nature, to George:

"Very fine water-power this, Major Dalton. I guess it would keep in motion more machinery than the largest steam-engine. The Weathersford paper-collar factory is supplied by a stream not *harf* the size of this." And he glanced round at Ruth to see what effect this display of practical wisdom had made upon her.

She had moved a few paces down the stream, and was kneeling on the brink dabbling in the water with her white hands, no thought of paper-collar factories or mill-wheels desecrating her enjoyment of the scene. Without making any reply to Æneas, George started away towards the young lady.

"What are you after, Ruth?" he asked, with a smile, as he paused and watched her occupation.

"Only trying to get some of that moss; but it is too deep for me, though it seems almost at the surface," she answered, pointing down to the bed of the stream, which was covered with a rank growth of aquatic moss, whose long green stems swayed to and fro in the current like water-snakes.

"You would have to be a good diver to reach that," said George, "and then would have nothing for your pains. That beautiful moss is a cheat and a delusion, like many other beautiful things in this world; out of the water it is nothing but a string of green slime. The water itself is another cheat. You thought you could reach to the bottom with your hand, yet see here."

As he spoke, he reached out a yucca-spear which he had in his hand, and drew towards him the faded leaf of a species of mammoth water-lily floating near the shore; and, when he had got it within reach, he seized the stem, and giving it a wrench that severed it from the root, proceeded to draw out fathom after fathom, till it lay coiled like a long green rope at his feet. While he was thus employed there came a sound of horses' hoofs clattering down into the dell, and in another moment the rest of the White House party—whom Pasha and Emir had left far behind on the road—came into view, with Claude Harfleur and Audley Malvern galloping at their head.

The whole party halted at the spring to refresh themselves before entering the crowded area around the lists. Audley assisted Claude to dismount; then, after gazing a moment in mute admiration on the scene, he turned to Ruth and said,—

"You are right, Miss Harfleur; your piney-woods' scenery does have its attractions, I am obliged to confess. Upon my word, such a stream as this would make drowning almost a luxury, and it's the best argument for the temperance cause I have ever seen. Here, bring me a cup, somebody; I feel as if I could turn teetotaler and drink nothing but cold water for the next half-hour."

"Here's a cup, but we can give you something better than water to put in it. Don't talk about teetotalism; that's heresy on a tournament-day," said Mr. Harfleur, jocosely.

And as he spoke, two servants approached with glasses and bottles that had been carefully stowed away in one of the carriages. Everybody took something except George Dalton, who, to the astonishment of the company, persistently refused to touch a drop, though pressed by Mr. Harfleur with effusive politeness.

"I have promised to play good boy to-day," said George, laughing, and not even taking his hands out of his pockets, as Mr. Harfleur tendered him a brimming glass. "But save your liquor, and I'll make up for it to-morrow by drinking the health of my good angel of to-day."

Mr. Harfleur continued to press the glass upon George, who at last received it from his hand, but, without touching it to his lips, poured the contents into the stream, saying, as he did so,—

"Here's a libation to Mrs. Bacchus. I know she's a temperance woman,—the wives of drunkards always are; and for the next twenty-four hours I am a teetotaler;" then, returning the empty goblet, he said, in a lower tone, and there was no mistaking his seriousness this time, "Mr. Harfleur, if I get drunk to-day, knowing, as I do, what will be the consequence if those savage brutes yonder once get from under my control, I am no better than a murderer."

Mr. Harfleur bit his lip and turned away. "The devil take the whole trio!" he muttered; "it's the first time in his whole life the cursed vagabond has ever refused to get drunk."

George and Ruth had the brett all to themselves when they started again. Æneas, only too glad to have escaped thus far with life and limb, would as soon have thought of bestriding the wheel of a railway locomotive as of voluntarily trusting himself again in George Dalton's hands; so he contrived to secure a place in one of the carriages, where he sat secure beside Miss Serena Birdsong, holding on his knee the pasteboard bandbox that contained the crown Miss Serena had twined for the Queen of Love and Beauty.

Ten minutes' drive brought them to the scene of action, just as the riding was about to begin. The horses were all unharnessed, and the vehicles ranged around in the shade of the live-oaks that skirted this natural circus. As it would be tire-

some to sit in the saddle during the whole day, those of the spectators who had come on horseback gave their steeds in charge to their grooms, and sought more comfortable quarters in the carriages of their friends. Claude and Colonel Malvern shared between them the back seat of the brett, so opportunely vacated by Æneas. The brett, with its handsome occupants, soon became an object of universal attention, and many a curious glance was directed towards the beautiful stranger by George Dalton's side.

The herald, or marshal of the day, as he was called, — for the South Ambury knights were not much of antiquarians, — was no other than our old friend Major Maelstrom. He recognized Audley and Ruth with a flourishing salute, and took pains to have the brett placed in a good position. He was covered with decorations, and made a tearing show as he went careering over the field on a splendid white charger, gayly bedizened, like its master. There was an orator of the day somewhere, too; but Audley was greatly relieved to find that he had already held forth, and the riding was to begin at once.

Our honest friend the major, as may be imagined, was not very deeply versed in heraldic lore, and made rather a bungling job of his announcements; but as the knights themselves were not much wiser, they felt their dignity in no degree touched. The first who presented himself at the lists gave in his title as "Knight of the Golden Fleece;" and as the next two in succession called themselves, respectively, knights of the "Holy Cross" and of "St. John of Jerusalem," the worthy major, reasoning inductively, naturally concluded the little particle *of* to be as essential to designations of chivalry as its more ambitious French representative to the titles of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy, and he clung to it as pertinaciously, gravely announcing "the Cid" as "Knight of the Cid," and "Cœur de Lion" as "Knight of Richard Core de Lion."

The knights themselves were rather a motley crew; but as the worthy planters of Petaula County were not very diligent students of Froissart and Comines, or even of Scott and Tennyson, their gravity was in no wise upset by a Launcelot of the Lake dressed as a New Orleans Zouave, or a Saladin the Great in cocked hat and knee-breeches. There was Harry Hotspur, too, in a blue sailor-jacket; Bayard in the uniform of a Georgia militia general; Robert Bruce in a Garibaldi shirt and Turkish trousers; while a red-striped "Knight of Artillery" went caracoling over the field in blissful unconsciousness of the anachronism he was committing. "The Black Prince" was objected to at first by our worthy major, on the ground that it would be derogatory to the dignity of the occasion, and likely to propagate incendiary ideas, for any one to appear in the character of a "nigger"; but, when the matter was explained to him, he withdrew his objections, merely insisting that the hero of Crecy and Poitiers should be announced as the "Prince in Black," and not called the "Black Prince," as if he was a nigger.

It is but just to add, however, that some of the characters were admirably sustained. "Red Jacket," as represented by a lithe Texan Ranger, looked as if he was born in a wigwam, and the "Knight of the Garter" would not have done discredit to a coronation day, though his title did scandalize some of the ladies; and Miss Serena blushed behind her fan when he was announced, and wondered that anybody could be so indelicate.

But if our honest rebel knights were somewhat befogged in the mists of chivalric tradition, they could not be charged with ignorance of its practices. The riding that day at Sandy Circle would have done honor to the Paladins of Charlemagne or the heroes of Arthur's Round Table. It is true there was this slight difference, that our nineteenth century knights do not punch out each other's brains, or run one another through the body by way of innocent diversion, yet their tilting is not altogether without the excitement of danger. When a single false thrust at a ring may send it flying back in the face of the luckless knight to deprive him of an eye or a tooth, the poising of his lance, albeit a wooden one, becomes a matter of some consequence; when a single false step may send his charger headlong over one of the bars, or a sudden shying to right or left may dash the rider's brains out against a ring-pole, it is plain that modern tilting may be fraught with both danger and difficulty, although its object may not be to run Brian de Bois-Guilbert through the ribs or to cleave Sir Launcelot's skull.

The number of rings usually put up is six, but the course was so long at Sandy Circle that it was increased to nine; and the bars for leaping were placed at a height of three and a half feet from the

ground, so that a man must be a skillful horseman even to enter the lists. The knights first rode round a clear track one by one as they were announced by the herald, without attempting the rings, and it was evident from this preliminary manœuvre that Red Jacket bid fair to carry off the honors of the day. Several of George's acquaintance observing him as they rode into the lists,—for he sat near the entrance,—cried out to him to join them, and at the end of the second round the call for him became so general that it was evident Major Dalton was looked upon as the champion rider of the district. Still, George persistently disregarded all solicitations to enter the ring, until some patriotic rustic, growing jealous of the Texan's laurels, called out at the top of his voice,—

"Halloo, Major Dalton, you ain't a goin' to let Texis carry it over old Georgy in this fashion, air you? Come out, man, and stand up for the honor o' your State."

Red Jacket turned a moment towards the speaker, then galloping across the field to where George sat, drew off his glove and cast it at his feet, amid the applause of the spectators. George took up the gauntlet.

"There is no getting out of it now," he said, turning to his companion; "so give me your colors, Ruth." And before she knew what he was about he had taken a small netted scarf of white and blue that had fallen from her shoulders and bound it on his arm; then, seizing some white roses that lay scattered on her lap, he placed one in his button-hole, and with the other decorated the head of Hero, his favorite saddle-horse, that Audley had ridden from the White House.

"What knight shall I announce?" inquired the herald, a minute after, as the new combatant prepared to enter the lists. George, who had never thought of a title, hesitated a moment, then, seizing a small Confederate flag that hung over the entrance, announced himself as "Knight of the Southern Cross," and dashed into the lists waving the popular emblem over his head. He was dressed in full regimentals, and, as he galloped through the ring on the splendid charger that he sat so gracefully, he certainly did appear as gallant and well-favored a knight as ever set foot in stirrup. The populace is always captivated by good looks, and George's great personal popularity, combined with the national prejudice in favor of the character he had assumed, and which, it was well known, he had nobly sustained in other than mimic combats, established him at once as the popular favorite, and he was received with shouts of applause that made the welkin ring. At the end of the preliminary course George halted a moment and waved his hat at the cheering multitude while the bars were being adjusted, then, taking the flag in his bridle-hand and seizing a lance in the other, he made his first round, clearing every bar and carrying every ring. Red Jacket did the same, and at the end of the three rounds there was a tie between them. The bars were then elevated to four feet; but with the same result: both steeds went vaulting over them as stags, and nine rings clicked upon the lance of each knight as he halted before the judge's stand. The excitement had now become intense. High stakes were bet, and each knight was cheered vociferously as he rode through the lists. At the third trial the time for running the tilt was shortened by ten seconds. Red Jacket's turn came first; he sped through the ring like a meteor, and two seconds of the allotted time were still to elapse when he reined in his steed and flung his nine rings at the judge's feet. The spectators were enthusiastic. Some people say that even Julian Harfleur was seen to clap his hands like a school-boy, while old George Bruen swore by the biggest oath he could muster that let Red Jacket do what he would, George Dalton could beat the devil himself on horseback.

George was now the object of universal attention, and every eye was fixed upon him, wondering how long this splendid contest would endure. Instead of proceeding directly to the ring when his turn came, George was observed to ride up to where the two Miss Harfleurs sat and address some query to the elder sister. She answered with a shake of the head, whereupon George turned away with a look of disappointment and spurred his horse into the course; but instead of taking the rings, he gave each one a tap on the outer rim as he passed that knocked it from the pole, and in two seconds less time than Red Jacket had taken flung his empty lance at the judge's feet in token that he gave up the contest. This voluntary defeat inspired as much enthusiasm as Red Jacket's victory, and George was still the hero of the day though he resigned its honors to his rival.

And now the interesting moment has arrived when the Queen of Love and Beauty is to be crowned, and every woman's heart flutters with expectation while Red Jacket passes slowly round the circle of spectators as if he took pleasure in tantalizing the eager fair ones. At last he halts beside the brett where the Harfleur sisters are seated. He hesitates a moment, for the gallant Texan is undecided whether he shall courteously crown the lady of the knight who had so generously resigned the victory to him, or whether he shall place it upon the brow of her whose more showy beauty has made a deeper impression upon his own uncultured fancy. For when poor Red Jacket threw down the gauntlet to George he had stood full under the fire of Claude's splendid eyes, and the first glance had conquered him. He wavered a moment between the two, when he met Claude's gaze a second time, and it was all over with him. He lowered his lance and laid the crown at her feet. Claude smiled and graciously extended her hand to the gallant stranger, who sprang from his horse and led her, amid the cheers of the multitude, to her flowery throne.

Just three weeks from that day the brave Texan lay on the frozen sod of Virginia, with the sleet falling on his upturned face and a clot of gore protruding from his breast.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SUSPICIOUS CHARACTER.

THE coronation passed off brilliantly. Never had Claude appeared more beautiful, and the graceful little speech in which she thanked Red Jacket for the honor conferred upon her was a model of appropriateness and elegance; the more so, as nobody knew that she had been learning it by heart these three weeks, in anticipation of the occasion. Americans never miss an opportunity for speech-making, so, after the queen, the orator of the day aired himself again; then the marshal was called upon, and delivered himself of a great deal of bad grammar in praise of the ladies. The more prominent knights were also called out to contribute their share to the general palaver, a requisition which George escaped by presenting his friend Malvern, much to the surprise of that young gentleman, who suddenly found himself, without any rhyme or reason, overwhelmed with cheers and plaudits, and vociferously called upon for a speech. Audley had not the least idea in the world, no more than the people themselves, why they wanted to hear him, or what he was expected to say, but, seeing that George had already made good his retreat, and that public attention was centred upon himself, he felt an awkward conviction that his position was an extremely absurd one, unless he did something to justify the public expectation; so, with the readiness and grace that never forsook him, he stepped forward and extemporized such a pretty little speech that, as George declared afterwards, you really would have thought there was something in it if you hadn't listened too closely.

The crowd seemed at a loss whom to call upon next, till some one happened to catch sight of Mr. Bruen as he leaned from his carriage-window the better to contemplate his niece, and pounced upon him; but at the end of half a dozen sentences the old gentleman stranded upon a heap of expletives not quite fit for ears polite, and, unable to proceed without his habitual mode of expression, floundered about hopelessly for a few seconds, then saved himself by abruptly proposing "three cheers for Jeff Davis," and making off under cover of the noise. Mr. Harfleur was called out next, for, although by no means a popular man, the public appetite for declamation was not yet appeased, and, as speeches had been squeezed out of everybody else that there was the smallest pretext for calling upon, he was for the nonce invested with a certain reflected popularity, as the father of the beautiful queen, and called to the stand as lustily as if he had been George Washington or Robert E. Lee. Mr. Harfleur expressed himself with ease and grace, but there was an air of condescension about him not likely to captivate a republican audience.

As Mr. Harfleur ascended the stand, Audley noticed a face in the crowd that seemed to observe him with peculiar attention. There was something sinister in the expression with which it watched the speaker, and a fierce, unnatural lustre gleamed in the dark-blue eyes, so singularly bright and piercing. It seemed to Audley that he had seen that face somewhere before: it was a countenance not likely to be easily forgotten, but he could

not locate the vague, undefined association it awakened in his mind. The stranger was too much absorbed in watching Mr. Harfleur to be aware of the scrutiny he was himself undergoing, so that Audley had ample leisure to contemplate his person. He was meanly dressed, with a slouchy hat drawn down over his forehead, and at the first glance appeared like an ordinary backwoods "cracker," but closer observation revealed something in his bearing strangely out of keeping with this mean exterior.

Suddenly, while Audley was watching him, the whole expression of the man's face changed, and instead of the covert, sinister gaze, there blazed forth a look of open hatred so intense and bitter that no words can describe it. Audley turned and followed the direction of the stranger's eyes, to see what it was that had so wrought upon him. Mr. Harfleur had just finished his address, and turned to leave the stand, and in doing so his eyes encountered those of the stranger. For a moment the sight seemed to turn him to stone; he stood riveted to the spot, with his eyes fixed in a glassy stare, like one paralyzed by sudden fear. His face became livid in its paleness, the cold perspiration oozed through his bloodless skin, and stood in great, beadlike drops upon his forehead. Those on the stand with him perceived that something was amiss, and hastened to his assistance; whereupon the iron man recovered himself with a powerful effort, and waved them courteously aside.

"It is only a momentary faintness," he said, with a frigid smile. "My lungs were never strong, and the exertion of speaking to a large audience is apt to produce this effect."

He took a few sips from the glass of water that some one offered, and, descending from the stand, was soon lost in the crowd.

A few minutes after, Audley observed signs of some unwonted commotion in that part of the assembly where Mr. Harfleur had disappeared, and which happened, singularly enough, to be the quarter occupied by the lower class of white people. Men were seen collecting in little groups, or running excitedly to and fro, with menacing looks, while an ominous murmur replaced the shouts of boisterous but innocent mirth with which the place had resounded but a moment before.

Audley felt curious to know what was going on; but as Claude's promotion to the throne and George's evasion of speech-making had left him and Ruth sole occupants of the brett, he could not go and leave the lady alone. While he was pondering over the indications already noticed, the confusion had become general, and suddenly the alarm was given,—"A spy! a spy! a Yankee spy!" followed by a universal rush of the crowd, like a pack of hounds when the game is up, towards the quarter where Audley had seen the stranger whose presence so overcame Mr. Harfleur. At the same moment that gentleman, looking very pale, but calm and self-possessed, slowly approached the brett, and, resting his right arm on the rim of one of the hind wheels, stood watching his daughter's face with a jealous but furtive scrutiny.

Very soon the hue and cry changed to a shout of ferocious triumph, and a file of volunteers, headed by Major Maelstrom and several of the knights, entered the arena leading a man with his hands bound behind him and a halter round his neck, while the rabble,—that "fickle, many-headed monster thing," — equally intent upon a spectacle, whether of a tournament or a hanging, greedily clamored for the immediate death of the victim. The procession passed close by where Audley was sitting on its way to the place of execution, so that he had a full view of the captive, in whom he now recognized at once the object of Mr. Harfleur's recent agitation and the suspicious fellow-traveler whom he had lost sight of somewhere on his journey to South Ambury.

Mr. Harfleur made a movement as if to place himself in the rear of the vehicle when he saw the captive approaching. But if his design was to escape observation he was too late; the quick eye of the stranger detected him and fastened itself upon his face. Mr. Harfleur, as though disdaining to retreat in the face of the enemy, retraced the backward step he had made, and a look of fierce defiance passed between the two as the condemned man strode proudly on to meet his doom. Audley was struck with the dignity of his aspect and the unflinching courage with which he faced the horrors of his situation. There was something almost sublime in the air of cool contempt with which he surveyed the hooting rabble at his heels, like a lion beset by jackals, wasting neither anger nor entreaties upon them. He did not look like a felon, in spite of the fetters and the

halter and the beggarly garb that enveloped him.

Ruth felt a natural inclination to shrink away from this scene of tumult and violence; but as her eyes wandered a moment towards the captive's face, they suddenly riveted themselves there with a terrible fascination, for in him she recognized the mysterious being who had so alarmed her in the church-yard. Audley, observing the change in her countenance, thought she was frightened at the mob, and proposed to lead her away to some quieter spot, when, suddenly rousing herself with a woman's native impulse to take the part of the unfortunate, without questioning as to his innocence or guilt, she seized her companion's arm, and cried, in a voice of earnest entreaty,—

"Oh, Colonel Malvern, save the poor wretch,—don't, don't let them hang him!"

The captive heard, and fixed upon her a look that thrilled Audley's very soul. Mr. Harfleur heard, too, and turned his flashing eyes upon her; but it was like the flashing of a deadly bolt. Audley started,—a strange, undefinable sensation came over him. He hardly knew what he thought. He dared not interpret what he seemed to read in the faces of those two men; but from that moment he felt that the prisoner must not die then and there; and, with a chivalrous disposition on his own part to befriend the weaker side, he plunged into the crowd determined if possible to save—at all events to respite—the captive.

As soon as he was gone, Mr. Harfleur turned upon Ruth with the air of a tiger seizing its prey.

"You have seen him before, and you lied about the ring," he whispered, in a voice fairly hissing with rage; and, clutching her arm in a grip that left the print of his iron fingers on its ivory whiteness, he glared upon her with the scowl of an avenging demon.

The mention of the ring brought back to Ruth's mind her strange adventure in the church-yard, and filled her with a tumult of emotions. Who could this man be, and what did it all mean? she vainly asked herself, and stared into her father's face with a look of blank terror and confusion. Her agitation seemed to confirm Mr. Harfleur's suspicions, whatever they were. His grip tightened on her arm till she fairly writhed with pain.

"You are plotting my destruction," he hissed, between his clinched teeth; "but it shall be turned upon your own head." And then, giving her arm a wrench as though he could have torn her limb from limb, he dashed her from him, and hurried away to join the crowd that went streaming out to the place of execution.

The prisoner, in the mean time, had been conducted a little way into the forest, out of respect to the nerves of the ladies, who might well be supposed averse to witnessing such a scene. The tall shafts of the pines afforded no low, strong branches suitable for the business in hand, so it was necessary to construct a gallows for the occasion, and—alas for chivalry!—the same poles at which knightly lances had been tilting not an hour before were hastily grubbed up and devoted to this ignominious service.

Major Maelstrom, who seemed to be the leading spirit in this summary administration of the laws of war, having dispatched several of the guard to see about putting up the gallows, volunteered himself to answer for the prisoner's safety, and, in his zeal for the public service, cocked a pistol and clapped it to the victim's temple, exclaiming, as he did so,—

"Now, Yank, budge an inch, and I'll blow your brains out."

The prisoner moved not a muscle, nor did his countenance betray the smallest trepidation as, cocking his eye at the zealous custodian with a half-humorous expression, he said, quietly,—

"Then, friend, you may just bet your bottom dollar I ain't going to budge."

A murmur of applause ran through the crowd at this exhibition of cool audacity, and the major drew back dumfounded.

"Why, Yank," he cried, with enthusiasm, "you behave like a Christian and a gentleman, and I'll be dogged if I like to see a man hanged that can face the music like that;" and he uncocked the pistol and put it back in his pocket.

"Look'ee here, boys," continued the major, addressing himself to the crowd, "I say hanging's too rascally an end for a brave fellow like this, I don't care where he comes from. It's good enough for the common run of Yankees, like Sherman's robbers, and be d—d to 'em, but this chap's got real Southern pluck in him, somehow, though he does carry it under a Yankee skin, and so I say, no dog's death for him, but let him be shot like a Christian and a gentleman."

A sardonic smile played over the prisoner's features as the crowd murmured assent to this benevolent proposition. There were some few malcontents, like our friend Jim Chance, who did not like

to be cheated of a show; but, after all, a shooting is almost as good as a hanging, and so the fusillade was unanimously agreed upon, when public expectation was again delayed by interference from an unlooked-for quarter. Mr. Bruen, though professedly the most volcanic of "fire-eaters," and an open advocate of unheard-of barbarities towards the whole Yankee nation, individually and collectively, was at bottom mild and tender as a woman, and his actions gave the lie flatly to his words. While constantly declaring that our people ought to raise the black flag and kill every Yankee devil they could lay hands on like a dog, now that a supposed Yankee spy was about to be executed under his very eyes he was the first man to interfere in the prisoner's behalf.

"Gentlemen," he began, with a precision of utterance that contrasted singularly both with the arbitrary violence of the mob and with his own usual impetuosity, "has it been proved that this person is a spy?"

Mr. Bruen had studied law a little in his youth, and was fond of airing his knowledge on grave occasions; but the people were in no temper to hear the dictates of law and order, and a rude voice from the crowd broke out in reply,—

"Proof,—who wants any proof against a d—d Yankee spy? Let him swing, just for belonging to their cussed nation; and if that don't suit you, maybe we can find him company."

"Gentlemen," continued Mr. Bruen, unintimidated by the covert menace, "do you know that in the eye of the law——"

"Look'ee here, mister," interrupted another voice from the crowd, "these here is war times, and your law is done played out. All the law I wants is one to hang every d—d Yankee scoundrel you can catch."

"Are you sure you have even caught a Yankee this time, friend?" asked the prisoner, in a voice which certainly did not betray the slightest trace of the Northern accent.

"Don't want to be sure," growled the boor, who seemed to regard as a personal injury every suggestion that threatened to interrupt or delay the spectacle. "All I wants is to see the rascal swing. If you've got to stop and prove that every Yankee scoundrel you catches is a Yankee, how many of 'em do you reckon 'll git their dues?"

"In the eye of the law," persisted Mr. Bruen, not heeding the interruption, "to put a man to death on insufficient evidence is murder, and unless there are witnesses——"

"Hold your tongue, old scalawag," cried a pert young lieutenant of conscripts, whose breeding seemed far behind his rank, small as the latter was, "or you'll have the privilege of dancing the tight-rope yourself before long; you are mighty——"

He was interrupted by a sturdy grip at his throat.

"Hold your tongue yourself, you infernal scoundrel!" cried an angry voice in his ear; "and the next time you presume to insult an old gentleman, make sure he has no grown-up sons or nephews at hand to defend him." And with that, George Dalton's powerful arm felled the miscreant to the earth, and pommeled him till he roared for mercy, old George Bruen looking on the while and encouraging his nephew with might and main.

"That's right; pitch into him, George, my boy," cried the old gentleman at the top of his voice. "I'd give him a kick myself if two to one wasn't unfair—ha! ha!—the scoundrel!"

It threatened, however, to become two to one the other way, for a party of conscripts belonging to the lieutenant's company, animated by that *esprit de corps* which belongs to men of every calling and every caste, advanced to the rescue of their officer. But George was too popular with all classes not to find plenty of "backers." Several of the knights who had just tilted against him, accompanied by stray volunteers who had served under him in the army, came forward to meet the "'scripts," as they contemptuously termed their adversaries, and the chivalric exercises of the day bade fair to end in a vulgar *mêlée*, when Audley Malvern interposed, and restored order. His indescribable charm of manner, aided by the splints and bandages, which in those days were a sure title to popular favor, won him a respectful hearing, where many a man of equal merit would not have ventured to open his lips.

"Boys," he said, using the old, familiar title that soldiers love, as he pushed boldly in among the combatants, "can you find nothing better to do than destroy each other, when the common enemy is thundering at your very door and insulting you on your own soil? Southern hands should be slow to draw Southern blood now, when every drop is precious, is essential to your country's life."

The men, who had not been maddened

yet by actual blows, fell peacefully back on either side as the handsome young officer made his way among them; while George, having taken his satisfaction out of the pert lieutenant, dismissed him without further bruising, after having exacted a public apology to his uncle. Then, taking the old gentleman on his arm, George turned him about, facing the crowd, and said,—

"Now, uncle, say just what you please, and I'd like to see the rascal that shall dare to interrupt you."

There is something in good, honest, knock-down pluck that always commands the respect of the multitude, and no one ventured to gainsay the young officer who stood up so manfully for his aged kinsman. The people waited in respectful silence, which was broken by the same voice that had first so rudely interrupted Mr. Bruen.

"Bully for you, Major Dalton!" cried the voice in a tone of sturdy approbation. "Let the old 'un fire away now, if he's got anything on his mind, and I'll back him myself,—ding me if I don't!"

But Mr. Bruen had taken in high dudgeon the insults put upon him, and would not condescend to avail himself of the hearing George had gained him.

"You are all a set of lawless scoundrels, and I'll be d—d if I cast my pearls before any such swine!" replied this modern Coriolanus, with an angry gesture; and, turning his back on the astonished multitude, he stalked away in offended dignity to his carriage. Audley immediately stepped into the place he had vacated at George's side.

"Gentlemen," he began, taking off his hat, and bowing composedly to the turbulent assembly, "since one better qualified has declined to speak, I trust you will allow me to say a few words in behalf of the prisoner. You will not, I am sure, mistake my motive in doing so, for I flatter myself, if you will pardon the boast, that the name of Malvern is sufficiently well known, to such of you at least as have served in the army of the Potomac, as to leave no doubt that he who bears it will ever have the good of his country at heart."

This announcement of himself was received with a perfect storm of applause; for Audley's dashing exploits had made his name a watch-word among the men with whom he had served. When the cheering had subsided, he continued,—

"Well, my countrymen, since you are ready to believe that I appeal to you only in the name of justice and humanity, I have no fear that words uttered in such a cause will not meet with due consideration from an audience of Southerners (cheers), however unworthy the speaker. I was once so near the halter myself (enthusiastic cheering), that I know too well what a hard and cruel thing it is to condemn an innocent man to so fearful and ignominious a fate.

"Now, I do not say that this person is innocent; he may be a Yankee spy, or he may not; we cannot tell; for all the evidence we have is a vague rumor running through the crowd, starting we know not where, and founded we know not upon what. Now, this very uncertainty of ours is the reason why I ask you to delay. If he is guilty, proofs against him will not be wanting, rest assured; if he is innocent,—and his speech certainly does not mark him a Yankee,—if he is innocent, my friends, the old gentleman yonder was right: we should all be murderers, and cowardly murderers to boot, if we put him to death; for when did brave men ever avail themselves of mere strength of numbers against one, solitary and unarmed? (loud applause). In cases of immediate and pressing danger, we don't always have time to inquire into matters as thoroughly as we would like, and military necessities are sometimes very cruel; but I see nothing about that fettered captive yonder so formidable as to call for needless haste. I think better of you, my countrymen, than to believe that you would deny justice to a man simply because he has not the power to demand it. It is not like Southerners, who have so nobly sustained their cause against odds of two, four, yes, even ten to one, to take advantage of a solitary captive when the odds are a thousand to one against him. Is it like Southerners to range themselves the strong against the weak? Would it be in keeping with the chivalrous instincts upon which we pride ourselves for a whole assembly to turn and make war on a single man, and that man unarmed and a prisoner? No; I know your generous Southern hearts would revolt against such meanness."

He was right. The Southern heart is sound and generous at the core; and though often swayed by wild, untutored impulses, often led astray by vanity, and blinded by false flattery, it is always ready to unfold its better side if rightly and judiciously appealed to. A perfect storm of applause hailed Audley Malvern as he finished his speech; and it was agreed on all hands that the prisoner should be

respited for the present and lodged in South Ambury jail, to await a fair and honest trial. Everybody seemed to be satisfied; for though they had been disappointed of a spectacle, had they not heard a speech? And to an American assembly a speech is almost as good as a hanging.

Everybody satisfied, did I say? No: there was one sorely disappointed. After the crowd had dispersed, a tall, proud form went wandering among the pines, wringing its hands and muttering disconsolately to itself, "Lost! lost! lost!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TOURNAMENT BALL.

The Spread Eagle Hotel, South Ambury, is a very elegant building for a provincial town; and its handsome drawing-rooms, brilliantly illuminated and decorated with autumn roses and Confederate flags, presented a very attractive scene when the beauty and fashion of South Ambury were assembled there on the evening of the tournament ball. The society of this little cotton-trading town had become of quite a cosmopolitan character during the war; so that a stranger, on entering a ball-room or other fashionable assembly, might have supposed himself, from the style and elegance that pervaded it, in the most favored circles of some great social metropolis. There were the wives and daughters of men who had been ambassadors and cabinet ministers, of major-generals, admirals, and commodores, while the refugee aristocracy of almost every State in the rebel Confederacy was represented by some of its proudest and most distinguished members.

The toilettes of the ladies, too, notwithstanding the rigors of the blockade, would have done credit to any assembly, so wonderful are the resources of feminine ingenuity when applied to that darling object of every woman's ambition—dress. There were satins and velvets that had figured at court-balls ten years ago, "done over," and looking as fresh, by lamp-light, as if just imported from Paris. There were jewels that had passed through more adventures than the famous diamond necklace of Marie Antoinette, and laces whose history was a romance.

Claude Harfleur's dress was by far the most elegant and costly in the room, and would, perhaps, have been considered out of taste for so young a person in any but American society. Resplendent in rose-colored satin and point lace, and fairly ablaze with jewels, she dazzled all eyes as she entered the ball-room, and seemed to illuminate the space about her with irradiations of her own glory.

But dazzling as Claude appeared, she did not wholly eclipse the more graceful, if less showy, charms of her sister. Ruth was not attired in the conventional robe of "simple white," in which the good girls in novels, especially the blondes,—poor things!—have to do all their campaigning, but her toilette—though one of the least expensive—was nevertheless the most striking and artistic in the room. It was of pale-green tarlatan—the most difficult of all colors to carry well—trimmed with a perfect foam of little ruffles and ruches, and dotted all over with white *marguerites*, like a patch of green meadow starred with daisies. Ruth, unlike her younger sister, had never had much command of money; but the exquisite taste in dress, which was partly natural to her, partly cultivated by her intercourse with the Creole population of New Orleans, more than supplied its place. There was something in the way she pinned on a bow or a flower; something in the set of every seam and the flow of every fold in her garments, aided no doubt by the exquisite symmetry of her form, that had a style and grace peculiarly its own.

As Audley Malvern watched her enter the ball-room, leaning on George Dalton's arm, he was more struck with her appearance than he had ever been before. She was indeed, as he had said before, none of your commonplace beauties, made up of a little pink and white set off with a pair of bright eyes and a crown of silky curls, but something to be studied, like a fine painting or statue; and each fresh survey revealed some new charm, till he seemed to discover in her all the perfections of the old masters combined. In certain lights her golden blonde hair emitted a kind of radiance like a halo; and then she reminded him of a Madonna of Perugino's that he had seen at Venice, while the mingled look of majesty and sweetness in the *pose* of the head and cut of the features called to mind the Venus of Milo. And then that exquisite toilette!

that lovely little glimpe of green meadow starred with daisies, so unique and so becoming, how it did set off and complete all the rest! Ah, how many men, I wonder, ever suspect how much a strip of lace or a rag of tarlatan has to do with the fate of their lives!

Audley had resigned Claude to her knight after the coronation, and, having now no special claims upon his attention, he wandered through the rooms to amuse himself at leisure in observing the crowd, always keeping in view, however, the form that so wrought upon his imagination. Nor was he the only person whose attention seemed attracted in that direction. From various disconnected scraps of conversation that reached his ear as he strolled about from group to group, Audley gathered that Miss Harfleur was the subject of universal comment.

"That tall, elegant blonde is the other sister, I suppose?" said a voice close behind him.

A soft feminine whisper replied, "Yes; very handsome, isn't she? but so haughty and full of airs!"

"Haughty!" exclaimed a third voice,—probably that of a matron with daughters, from its tone,—"she'd better not try anything of that sort, or she'll start people to making reflections."

The band here set up a furious clangor that drowned all other sounds for the next five minutes. The first thing Audley heard when it subsided was the voice of Mrs. Moidore Marmaduke, one of the leaders of South Ambury society, addressing a gentleman with whom she was promenading.

"Yes, very handsome, as you say, Mr. Softalk," observed Mrs. Marmaduke, "but there's something about her I can't admire; she's too theatrical and Frenchy. They do say she ran away once to join an opera troupe, and made several public performances." Mrs. Marmaduke shuddered at the idea.

"I am told she has a divine voice," said the gentleman; "did you ever hear her sing?"

"Yes, her voice is superb, but too professional. Why, if you weren't told better you might think it was Patti, or Ristori, or any of those public singers." Mrs. Marmaduke passed on, but the next couple that came along were pursuing the same theme.

"Where have they kept her hid all this time?" inquired a deep bass voice.

"Off in some convent, I believe," replied a shrill feminine treble; "but the priests wanted to make money out of her, they say, and sold her to an opera troupe. The family got wind of it somehow, and had to bring her home for safe-keeping; it wouldn't do for her to be famous, you know."

"Partners for the Lancers!" shouted the stentorian voice of the floor-manager; and in the rush for places Audley lost sight of this interesting couple.

As the dancers now took possession of the floor he was forced to back against the wall, where the plain girls and the old dowagers sit, waiting, the former for partners, the latter for supper. He was forced by the crush to stand for some time near a group of three worthy matrons, sitting with their heads close together, as if discussing some rare bit of scandal.

"Major Dalton's very attentive to her," said one; "they say he is going to marry her."

"Impossible!" cried her right-hand neighbor, a sharp-nosed, wiry little woman who had a marriageable daughter of her own. "The family would never consent to it, and besides, it's all settled that he's to marry Claude."

"Ah, but George Dalton," returned the first speaker, "isn't the man to ask anybody's consent when he once sets his head on a thing; and as for Claude, she's to marry that French count she met in Richmond."

"Count, indeed! some no-account, you'd better say," put in number three, a stout, comfortable-looking lady with fat red cheeks and a double chin. "George Dalton knows which side of his bread is buttered, you'd better believe. His father left him as poor as a rat, and he hasn't got it in him ever to make a cent beyond what his uncle gives him, and George Bruen would disinherit him outright before he'd let him marry that girl, I know."

"Yes, indeed," protested number two; "why, do you know, that young man Malvern that brought her home came here on purpose to marry her, they say; but when he heard——" Here the three heads went so close together that the sharp nose almost dipped into the double chin, and the voices sank for some minutes into an inaudible whisper. When the three heads separated the ladies remained silent for a few seconds, looking most deliciously scandalized, and their eyes wandered towards Ruth.

"And she hasn't a red cent to bless herself with," continued the sharp-nosed matron, after a close inspection of the subject of this amiable conversation.

"Her grandfather left everything to Julian Harfleur's children, they say, and made no provision for her, except some trifle that he left in trust to his brother to be used in hushing up by-gones and keeping her out of the way. George Dalton marry her, indeed!"

"But you know how eccentric he is," persisted the retailer of this bit of news, loath to be deprived of her stock in trade. "He is the very man to take up with some girl that nobody in his senses would ever dream of."

Somehow the words of these idle gossips made Audley feel uncomfortable. He knew that a great deal they had said was false, but what was the meaning of all this mystery and scandal that people seemed to connect with Ruth's name? And then George Dalton, — what if he had really had taken a fancy to the girl? Why does Audley turn so pale at the thought? Was Ruth Harfleur anything to him, "a girl that no man in his senses would ever dream of"? He smiled contemptuously, and directed his eyes across the room to where Ruth was standing. She was near a window, with her face partially turned from him, and the light from a large chandelier fell full upon her features, so that their pure, statuesque outline was clearly defined against the dark drapery in the background. Audley was almost startled at the impression her beauty made upon him. He stood a long time gazing at her, unable to remove his eyes from her face, then at last withdrawing them by a sudden effort, he turned away and hurried into another room.

"The next set is ours, I believe, Miss Harfleur," he said, offering his arm to Claude as she withdrew, flushed and panting, from a furious *valse à deux temps*. He knew it was not, but then the handsome rascal felt perfectly sure that Claude would break any other engagement to dance with him, and he was not mistaken.

"Excuse me, Captain Warwick," she said, turning to a young officer who had been lying in wait to seize her as soon as the *deux temps* was over. "I had forgotten, when I promised you this dance, that I was already engaged to Colonel Malvern." And Warwick, who had a strong suspicion of the *mensonge*, withdrew to console himself, along with other disappointed aspirants for that same dance, at the punch-bowl in the corridor.

"How dreadfully that creature danced! I am ready to suffocate," said Claude, leaning a trifle more heavily on the arm of her companion than was, perhaps, altogether necessary. There were no such things as ices in those days of Southern independence, so Audley offered her a lemonade, and then led her away into the recess of a window.

"You will find it cooler here," he said, drawing aside the curtain, "and we are out of the crush, too."

Claude leaned forward to drink in the fresh air, and as she did so, a pink moss-rose-bud that she wore in her bosom dropped from its place and fell upon Audley's hand.

"Generous little flower," he said, regarding it with a tender smile. "I wish I dared regard you as a propitious omen." He took it up and touched it to his lips, then drawing from his breast-pocket a little note-book, the repository of all his *souvenirs*, he scribbled something upon a blank leaf, and laid the rose-bud on it. As he did so something slipped from between two other leaves, and fell, unperceived by him, upon the floor. Claude stooped and picked it up. A sudden pallor overspread her features, and she thrust what she had found hastily into her bosom. It was all done in a moment, and when Audley raised his eyes she was toying carelessly with her fan, and her face was like the sunny side of a ripe peach.

"Now, I insist upon seeing what you have written there," she said, playfully, detaining his hand, as he was about returning the little book to his pocket. "I can't give you my rose-bud for nothing, and I demand in payment to have my curiosity gratified."

"And I, like the poor debtor, must crave time to pay," returned Audley, in a voice full of tender insinuation.

"How long?"

"I cannot tell; it rests with you to say if I may ever dare to reveal what is written here." And he struck the little book against his heart with an air of double meaning that deepened the hue upon Claude's cheek.

Her changing color and drooping eyelids did not escape Audley. He felt that the situation was becoming serious, and he was not ready for that yet. He intended, in a general way, to marry and settle down some day, and Claude seemed to answer all his requirements as to family, fortune, person, etc., and he liked her as well as any woman whom he had contemplated from a business point of view, as he irreverently termed his matrimonial spec-

ulations. Still, he shrank from irrevocably committing himself, and felt half provoked at having carried his tender fooling so far. Just then, as he was casting about for some way of retreat, the music came to his relief.

"Don't forget, Miss Harfleur," he said, as the band broke out afresh, "that you have promised me the honor of your hand for this dance." And the next minute they were gliding through the intricate mazes of the stately and beautiful Prince Imperial Quadrille, just then imported from France.

In the mean time, Ruth was standing her trial at the bar of South Ambury society. Though the criticisms of the ladies that Audley had overheard were not particularly favorable, beauty will always exert its sway over the other sex, and there were men enough eager to secure so graceful a partner. But Ruth persistently refused to dance, and betrayed an absence and preoccupation of manner that seemed like rudeness to the gay cavaliers, ignorant as they were of the painful scenes through which she had that day passed. It was in vain she tried to shake off the influence that oppressed her and join in the general festivity. Through all the light and glitter she was haunted by visions of that mysterious form, rising before her like a ghost, in the shadow of her mother's tomb, or turning to look at her so strangely as it moved along amid the hooting rabble to meet its death. The blaze of the chandeliers seemed to pale before the memory of the fierce, wild glare of her father's eyes, and she seemed still to feel his angry grip on her arm, and to hear ringing above the sound of music and dancing those inexplicable words, "You are plotting my destruction, but it shall be turned upon your own head." She had been averse to attending the ball, but could not avoid it without exciting remarks, so she did her best to collect her thoughts and make herself agreeable to those who were kind enough to seek her acquaintance; but she either talked at random or forgot to talk at all, so that the general verdict of the men was, "handsome, but nothing in her."

As she would neither dance nor talk, her admirers gradually dropped off, till finally she was left alone with a very young gentleman named Briggs, who felt bound to stay for politeness' sake. Of all the burdens society imposes upon rational women, the awful expedient of "making talk," especially to very young gentlemen, is one of the hardest, and poor Ruth felt herself almost at the verge of desperation, exchanging platitudes with Mr. Briggs, when Colonel Malvern, having finished his quadrille with Claude, stepped up and asked her for a waltz. Briggs seized the chance and made his escape out of hand, leaving the two together in a retired part of the room near a side door opening on a little balcony, from which a flight of steps led down into a handsome garden belonging to the wife of the wealthy proprietor of the Spread Eagle. Ruth still persisted in her determination not to dance, much to Audley's surprise, and regret also, judging from the expression of his countenance.

"Why, I thought you were very fond of dancing? you told me so the other day, and I am sure you dance well; an *Orléanoise* always does," he said, with an admiring glance at the graceful figure.

"Yes, I am fond of it sometimes, but I can't, I don't feel like it, to-night."

"Try just one round to put yourself in the spirit," he said, coaxingly. "There's the music—a spirited gallop; come, leave your wrappings here on the table."

As he spoke, he lifted a fleecy scarf that she had carried on her arm all the evening, professedly as a provision against draughts. She gave a start, and made a gesture to prevent him, but too late. He tossed the pretty covering carelessly aside, and in so doing revealed the deep purple prints that Mr. Harfleur's fingers had left upon her arm. Ruth's face turned crimson.

"Take me home," she cried, in a trembling voice. "I must go; take me away; I can't stay here any longer."

Audley reddened too as their eyes met. He had a suspicion somehow, he could not tell why, that Mr. Harfleur was responsible for those marks, and his first impulse was to seize the poor little bruised arm tenderly in both his hands and vow—well, he hardly knew what; but, checking himself, he hastily replaced the scarf, and, without a word, led her half fainting from the room.

George met them on the balcony as they were descending into the garden. He saw that something was amiss, and faced Audley with a reproachful, almost an angry, look. Audley appeared not to notice this tacit rebuke.

"Miss Harfleur is not well," he said, "and wants to go home. Is Mr. Bruen's carriage at the gate?"

"Yes, it's waiting," replied George. "You are tired early, Ruth; but I don't wonder. As Sir Cornwall Lewis says, 'This would be a very pleasant world were it not for its amusements.'" And he gave vent to a long-suppressed yawn. "Shall I find you here when I come back, Malvern?" he added, in an undertone.

Audley nodded assent as he reluctantly resigned the young lady to her cavalier. "Yes, come back and take a cigar with me here in the garden."

"What is the matter, Ruth?" asked George, as the carriage-door closed upon them.

"Nothing—no—yes—that is, I can't tell." And neither of them spoke another word until they said "good-night" at Mr. Stockdale's door.

Two hours later, when the revel was over and Claude retired to the chamber that she and her sister were to occupy together, she seated herself quietly on the edge of the bed where Ruth lay sleeping, and gazed long and earnestly at the prostrate form before her. Twice her eyes conned slowly over the unconscious figure, taking careful note of every outline, of every feature, from the utmost fold of the white robe that enveloped it to the crowning wave of amber hair that floated over the classic forehead. Presently she rose, drew from her bosom a silky blonde curl, and laid it stealthily on her sister's head. There was no mistaking its identity; the world could not produce another such wonderful texture of silk and gold. Claude frowned, the soft curl slid from her hand to the floor, and she stood staring at it as if it had been a snake. Raising her eyes at last, they happened to fall upon a mirror opposite. The cloud vanished, and a smile of triumph played over her features as she gazed upon the charms that had never yet failed to conquer. She took up the blonde curl again,—not with a frown this time,—and, flinging aside the flowery crown that bound her head, shook down her own rich masses of dark-brown hair, and proudly compared them with the pale amber tresses that shrouded her sister's head and shoulders like a sunlit cloud. Then, satisfied with the inspection, she prepared herself for bed, and lay down to rest beside her sister, to dream perchance of the same dark eyes that haunted Ruth's slumber, and to hear again the low, tender voice that had unwittingly set many another poor heart to dreaming dreams from which it was destined perchance to awaken some day and find them, as our beautiful dreams but too often are, only a delusion and a snare.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FRIENDLY WARNING.

GEORGE returned to the Spread Eagle, and joined Audley in the garden.

"At the German already, are they?" he said, listening a moment to the inspiriting strains that proceeded from the ball-room. "So the revel is pretty well over."

"Yes, but they've just commenced the closing set," replied Audley, "and the German is confoundedly long, you know,—have another cigar."

George accepted the proffered Havana, and walked on at his friend's side for some time in silence; then, after a few turns, he paused and asked, abruptly,—

"I say, Audley, have you been talking *contraband* to anybody to-night?"

"Well, I am afraid I came pretty near it," said Audley, as he thought of the little scene with Claude in the window; "but I backed out before any mischief was done," he added, laughing.

"Umph! I don't know about that," said George, and he thought of Ruth's drooping figure and melancholy air.

"Well, even supposing I may have committed myself a little too far," replied Audley, in a half-argumentative tone, as if reasoning with himself, "I don't see that there is any very great harm done. A man must marry some day, you know, and she's as beautiful a woman——"

"Beautiful! ah, yes, if that were all," interrupted George; "I have never seen her match, and if called upon this minute to name the most perfect and faultless beauty I had ever seen, I would say, beyond all comparison, Ruth——"

"Thunder!" Audley turned sharply round and eyed his friend. Somehow, the sudden mention of that name, in connection with the one that had just been occupying his thoughts, startled him, and made him feel, he could not tell why, very uncomfortable. It was several seconds before he recovered himself, then, turning to resume their walk, he said, in a bantering tone,—

"Upon my word, George, I am beginning to be alarmed about you. Only the other night you were warning me, in language fearful with mystery, to beware of a certain young lady's fascinations, and now, the deuce take me if I don't believe you are going to fall a victim to them yourself."

"I am afraid, Audley," answered his friend, speaking very seriously, and looking him steadfastly in the face, "that if there is any victim in this case it is more likely to be that poor girl."

"You seem to have a fancy for talking in riddles, George, whenever Miss Harfleur is the subject of conversation," said Audley, impatiently. "If you will condescend to deal in plain English, so that a fellow of moderate intellect can see what you are driving at, I will endeavor to give you my attention."

"Well, then, in plain English, I mean that it won't do for you to make love to Ruth, as you are in the habit of doing to every pretty woman that comes in your way."

"And why the devil shouldn't I make love to her," asked Audley, sharply, "if I choose, and if she chooses?"

"Because," cried George, "it would be an infernally cruel thing to trifle with her, and you couldn't possibly marry her."

"Riddles again," said Audley, shrugging his shoulders. "You'll have to explain yourself, George, if you want a commonplace fellow like me to comprehend you."

George took off his hat, ran his fingers through his hair, replaced the hat on his head, stuck his hands back in his pockets, and began,—

"I know, Audley, I'm not exactly the sort of fellow to be making moral lectures, and that sort of thing, seeing I don't pretend to be above reproach on the moral code myself; but you know I'm a man of honor for all that, and there are some things I can't think right or honorable."

George paused, and commenced fumbling nervously in his pockets. He felt rather awkward in the post of mentor to his brilliant companion, and did not know exactly how to proceed. Audley gave him no assistance, but walked along at his side, quietly puffing his cigar.

"Well, now, you know, Audley," he began, taking a fresh start, "you are a devilish good-looking chap,—all your family are, and you all know it, too."

"That means I am a conceited puppy," said Audley, dryly.

"No, it don't," cried George; "and you won't laugh, Audley, when you hear what I have got to say, if I ever can get it out," for George knew he was right, though he was not used to the *rôle* of "good boy," and floundered about in it with much stumbling and balking. Besides, what he had to say concerned a lady, and his chivalrous nature found it hard to approach the subject with sufficient delicacy.

"Well?" said Audley, interrogatively, as his friend came to another dead halt.

"Well," continued George, getting fairly under way this time, "you know you have a great way of talking love to the women, without meaning anything in particular, just because they like it, and it amuses you. As you are never in earnest yourself, you fancy they never are either, and so you really don't mean any harm. Some hardened old stagers that are up to all the ways of the world take your pretty speeches for what they are worth, and there is no harm done, but many a poor little innocent fancies you are as true and loving as herself, and there is no telling what pangs the foolish little heart endures before it can make a final transfer of itself to some honest lover."

"In other words, I am a precious coxcomb," said Audley, putting a fresh cigar to his lips; "but go on."

"Now, you know," continued George, not heeding the interruption, "the young lady we have been speaking of was bred in a convent, and is therefore not very likely to be up to all the ways of the world—especially the men in it. Now, I don't want to make a puppy of you, Audley, but from many little things I've noticed I'm afraid you've been up to some of your old tricks, my boy, and that she has taken you *au sérieux*."

Audley colored in spite of himself, and his heart beat with a quicker motion.

"I think it is you who are taking things *au sérieux*, George," he said, trying to laugh.

George paid no attention to the retort. "And if she has," he continued, with vehemence, "you are doing an infernal heartless and cruel thing, a beastly thing, in winning through sheer thoughtlessness, and to while away an idle moment, the affections of a woman whom it is impossible you could ever think seriously of marrying."

Somehow George's suspicion, foolish and unfounded as it was, sent a thrill of pleasure through Audley's frame; but

even if it had been just, he was too much of a gentleman to flatter his own vanity at a lady's expense. Numerous as his conquests were, Audley Malvern had never in his life been heard to boast of one.

"Your fears do me great honor," he said, "but I am afraid honesty will compel me to confess that Miss Harfleur is not as sensible of my fascinations as you seem to think her. As for the matrimonial question, it is hardly possible that either of us should have given serious consideration to that, during an acquaintance that dates scarcely ten days back; but now that you have put it into my head," he added, "hang me if I can see why a fellow shouldn't think seriously of it, if she'd let him."

"But I see reason enough," cried George, "why a man like you could not and would not think of such a thing for a minute. You remember I said something the other night about a *bend sinister* and a *halter?*"

"Yes; and I think," said Audley, shaking the ashes from his cigar, "that I have made out part of your riddle."

"What,—that she is not Harfleur's daughter?"

Audley answered with an inclination of the head.

"Just so," said George. "She has no more right to the name than you or I. Her real father was hanged for robbery and murder, and her mother was never legally married to him."

Audley gave a start. "Hanged! are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, hanged; and if all accounts be true, a more unmitigated villain never mounted the gallows."

Audley removed his cigar from his lips, and watched the little rings of blue smoke that went curling up from it, till they vanished in the misty night air. Then he said, thoughtfully,—

"And yet, she don't look as if she had vile blood in her veins."

"I don't know that she'd have any better if Mr. Harfleur was her father," said George, dryly; "for, in my opinion, he is only a scoundrel that hasn't been found out."

"I can't say that I am very agreeably impressed with him myself," replied Audley, "but, at least, he's a gentleman scoundrel; he doesn't look as if there was a drop of plebeian blood in him."

"A drop of fiddlesticks!" growled George; "it's gall and wormwood that flows in his veins. Confound your arrogance, Audley! I believe you aristocratic Virginians plume yourselves more upon your blue blood than upon those noble traits of mind and heart that have justly raised your State to such high eminence."

"The one is but the natural offspring of the other," said Malvern, proudly; "but come, tell me about this little family romance. I hope I haven't played the deuce in taking upon myself to appear as the young lady's *preux chevalier*, in introducing her to her family?"

"No, you did perfectly right. Poor girl; she hasn't many friends to stand by her, and that of itself would incline a fellow to take her part, even if there were nothing else about her to interest him; but she seems to me quite above the common run of women, I confess; she has struck my fancy more——"

"So I perceive," said Audley, interrupting him; "so much so that you don't want her to strike anybody else's fancy."

"Don't pretend to misunderstand me, Audley. You know very well that there is but one woman in the world to whom I could ever feel as a lover. I wish to heaven it were otherwise; I wish I could be captivated by anything that has a heart, if she had all the ugly words in the language for her pedigree."

Audley felt the bitter import of his words, and was silent. After a short pause, George resumed,—

"As to that little romance, as you call it, about Ruth's father, I am not sure that I am myself acquainted with all the facts of the case. It's a family secret that has been hushed up as much as possible, and kept from the younger generation. Neither Claude nor Bruen have ever heard a breath of it, and Ruth was sent away from home as soon as her mother died, to keep her from finding out. Mrs. Harfleur would never consent to part with the child while she lived. I was a little chap myself, hardly out of bibs and petticoats, when it all happened, but the scandal had not died out when I was growing up, and I heard whispers of it from the servants. I'll tell you all I know, by way of putting you on your guard. You've heard of old Randolph Bruen, who cut such a figure in the United States some thirty years ago?"

Malvern nodded assent.

"Well, he was Ruth's grandfather. His daughter Nettie was the greatest fortune in all the country, and the crack beauty of her day. I remember her as she was in the latter years of her life, very beautiful still, but sad and humbled,—not a bit like the portrait. That, however, was after her misfortunes; they say

she was, in her youth, as willful and hard-headed a piece as ever lived, and spoiled beyond remedy by her father and my uncle, who was so much his brother's junior as to seem more like a brother than an uncle to Nettie.

"The old gentleman had set his head on marrying her to Julian Harfleur, who had been courting her ever since she was born, and though very poor, belonged to an excellent family, and was considered one of the most talented and promising young men in the State. Nettie, however, wouldn't hear anything of the sort, and finally, like the hard-headed little vixen that she was, ended by taking up with a foreign adventurer calling himself Seabury, whom she met in Washington, and married him in spite of everything. Old Randolph, when he found he couldn't help himself, consented reluctantly to the match, but quarreled with his precious son-in-law before the honey-moon was well over, and cussed him out of the house. Seabury, who with all his rascality seems to have been a plucky chap, gave the old gentleman as good as he sent, and, gathering up bag and baggage, started off for California, Nettie standing by him like a true woman all the time. He was induced by the entreaties of her family to leave the young wife behind till after the birth of the baby she was expecting, so he set off alone, giving out that he was going to prepare a home in the Far West, and would come back for her within a year; the journey to California was a business of months, you know, in those days. There's a story, too, about his having left a ring with her of fabulous value, which she lost soon afterwards very mysteriously,—but I don't remember much about that,—it was probably something he had got as a gambler or pick-pocket; some people think he stole it back from her himself, but nobody knows."

Audley started at this mention of the ring, and wondered if it could be the same Ruth wore upon her finger; then immediately smiled at his own folly, as he remembered how she had obtained it, and thought of the endless chain of coincidences, creating almost a logical absurdity, that would have been necessary to render such an event possible. Still, somehow the idea, wild as it was, kept recurring to his mind, though he did not think it worth while to interrupt his friend's narrative to impart so absurd a speculation.

"Well," continued George, "the upshot of it all was he never came back, and she never even heard of him again till some eighteen months after her baby was born: she learned through the papers that an outlaw named Seabury had been hanged by a mob in California for some outrage or other committed by him, leaving, it was stated, half a dozen widows (for he was a confoundedly handsome devil) in various places to mourn his fate. Mr. Bruen sent a confidential agent, some shrewd Yankee that Harfleur found out for him, to inquire into the matter, and discovered that the fellow had originally fled from England to escape the hands of justice, and that he had already been married to three or four wives, under as many different names, before Nettie ever saw him. What his real name was could never be discovered.

"Poor Nettie never got over it. She was so infatuated with the scoundrel that she loved him and believed in him to the last in spite of everything. They say he was as fascinating a dog as ever lived; could talk like a demi-god when he chose, and had the voice of an Apollo."

This story made a strange impression on Audley Malvern. While it accounted for many things that had puzzled him, it gave rise at the same time to new doubts and speculations,—vague and undefined, it is true; so vague that he scarcely admitted them to his own mind, but they made him uncomfortable. He felt provoked at himself, too, for caring at all about the matter. What was this girl to him,—a mere chance acquaintance whom he had known scarcely three weeks,—that he should concern himself as to who or what were her progenitors? And yet, his first words betrayed that whether he admitted it or not, he did care. He walked on for some minutes in silence; then flinging away his cigar, he paused in his walk, and said, thoughtfully,—

"And this villain was the father of Miss——"

"Harfleur," said George, supplying the word for him. "You may as well continue to call her so, since the rightful owner of the name has graciously permitted her to bear it, and we don't know that she has as good a title to any other. Mr. Harfleur is a model of magnanimity," George continued, with covert irony. "After all the scandal about Seabury, he renewed his addresses to Randolph Bruen's daughter, expressly disclaiming all designs upon her fortune, and magnanimously offered to adopt her child and let it go by his name. The family, overcome by this generosity, beset Nettie to

seize the opportunity for covering up her shame; but she held out against them a long time, and only yielded at last to the dying entreaty of her father, in consenting to become Julian Harfleur's wife. The old man went the way of all flesh soon after, leaving his property expressly to Nettie's *legitimate* children,—Julian Harfleur to have the use thereof during life. No provision was made for the poor little waif,—who had no right to be in the world at all,—except, I believe, there was some verbal stipulation with my uncle that the proceeds of certain property placed in his hands should be appropriated to her education. He looked upon her as the living monument of his daughter's shame, and recommended that she should be induced to enter a convent if possible. The only idea with them all was to get her out of the way somehow. My uncle opposed it a little at first; but Mr. Harfleur persuaded him, and carried everything his own way. She was packed off as soon as her mother died, and nobody seemed to care very much about it except her old nurse, who was soon got rid of too. I was a youngster, about fourteen years old, at the time; but hang me if I didn't think, even then, they were a cursed sight too anxious to get rid of her."

George made a long pause, during which Audley was too much occupied with his own thoughts to volunteer any remark. After taking several turns up and down the garden-walk in silence, George laid his hand on Audley's shoulder, and said, in a tone of friendly admonition,—

"Now, old boy, I have told you all I know about her, and of course you don't need to be reminded that a girl without fortune, without family, without a name even, it would be entirely out of the question for a man in your position, with all your confounded prejudices about blood and pedigree, and that sort of stuff, ever to think seriously of——"

"Of course,—entirely out of the question," said Audley, mechanically.

"And a poor, unfortunate girl, upon whose innocent head the world is only too ready to visit the sins and mistakes of those that went before her,—it is equally out of the question for a man like you, Audley, to trifle with. I appeal to your own noble instincts; would it be generous, would it be honorable, would it be anything but d—d beastly and puppyish, to go on fooling round this girl, and saying all sorts of little tender speeches, merely for your own amusement, till her heart was irrevocably lost? I tell you what, Audley, you've never been in love yourself, and don't know how bad it hurts; and if it goes so hard with a good-for-nothing dog like me, what would it be to her? It wouldn't matter so much if she stood on equal ground, like the other women that flirt with you, my boy, but it ain't worthy of you to let even a random shaft fly at one who stands at a sad disadvantage with all the world; I know you wouldn't mean to do it,—I don't believe you are coxcomb enough deliberately to flirt with any woman living, but you know, Audley, you are a devilish fascinating fellow, and play the very dickens with women sometimes, without even knowing it;—but in this case you must be on your guard, and you can't pretend not to know, for I tell you the mischief is begun already; that poor girl wouldn't have blushed as I saw her do at the mere mention of your name this morning for nothing."

Audley looked in his friend's face and smiled, but colored slightly, in spite of himself, as their eyes met.

"George," he said, "you are a noble, generous fellow, and I honor your motives in all you have said, but the warning is entirely unnecessary; you flatter me too much in attributing every blush that a woman gets up to my fascinations, overwhelming as I dare say they are."

George shook his head. "This is no subject for jesting, Audley."

"Well, if nothing else will satisfy you," continued the other, "perhaps it will quiet your fears to know that Miss Harfleur is absolutely impervious to my fascinations. I tried them on her once, when we first became acquainted, and got told for my pains that I was shallow and impertinent."

"Umph!" growled George. "I am glad one woman has had the pluck to pitch into you as you deserve. Did she really say that, though?"

"Yes, or something very like it, with a good many other soft insinuations to the same purpose, which squelched me so effectually that I've stood quite in awe of her ever since; in fact, she's the only pretty woman I ever saw in my life that I absolutely could not talk *contraband* to, as you call it, if I tried, and I've quite made up my mind to fall seriously in love with her sister. There, does that content you? But come, the dance is over,—let's go say something polite to the lady managers, and be off."

When Audley was alone in his room that night, he drew from his breast-pocket the little book in which he had placed Claude's rose-bud, and turned, not to the flower, but to the pages where he had laid the blonde curl that he had picked up from the ground after the accident at Kiokee River. But the curl was gone, and only the blank leaves remained. Audley smiled a melancholy smile, and turned to the pink rose-bud, that exhaled sweet perfume in his hand, and still looked almost as fresh as when it first dropped from the wearer's bosom.

"I must have dropped it when I laid this here," he said to himself. "Well, perhaps it is best; a man can't stoop to pick up daisies when the rose is blushing in his hand."

He tossed the little book carelessly on the mantel-piece, before which he was standing, and commenced pacing slowly up and down the room. After a few turns he paused again, and said aloud, as if settling some debate with himself, "Yes, yes, Claude Harfleur is the woman for me,—fine fortune, fine family, handsome, suitable every way. I'll trifle over it no longer;" and having come to a definite understanding with himself, he went to bed, and dreamed of—the blonde curl.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BIRD HAS FLOWN.

George Dalton and his friend did not return directly to Sandowne after the tournament, but spent the next week or two on a marauding excursion with a party of officers from the garrison at South Ambury. On their return, George invited our friend Major Maelstrom to accompany Malvern and himself to Sandowne. As their route lay by the scene of the recent tournament, their conversation naturally turned upon the occurrences of that eventful day, and after some discussion of the horses and riding, the major suddenly turned to Audley, and remarked,—

"By the way, colonel, I forgot to tell you that the scoundrel you kept from being hanged the other day has been sent to Andersonville."

"Then you might as well have let him be hanged at once," said George.

"He didn't seem to think so, at any rate," returned the major.

"Did he have full liberty of choice?" asked George.

"Well, to speak plainly," said the major, gravely contemplating the handle of his riding-whip, as if addressing himself to that, "it amounted to little else in the main than a choice between the chances of dying there and being hanged here. You see Mr. Harfleur and one or two others were so confident of his being a spy, that nothing would suit them but the fellow must be hanged right away, so, to get rid of the business, I quietly slipped him off to Andersonville day before yesterday, along with a lot of Yankee prisoners that came up from Florida."

Audley listened with eager attention. The mention of Mr. Harfleur's name brought back to his mind all the wild, half-formed conjectures that had been floating through it since the day of the tournament.

"Did Mr. Harfleur urge this man's execution again after he was carried to South Ambury?" asked Audley, quickly.

"Yes; he came to my office two or three times about it," said the major; "in fact, he seemed so anxious about it that I couldn't hardly help thinking there must be something more than he was ready to own at the bottom of it all."

"Perhaps he had some special grounds of suspicion against the man," suggested Audley. "Couldn't you find out anything about the fellow,—what's his name, and where he came from?"

"He called himself Dick Roby, and that's about all I could get out of him, he kept so close. He stuck it out, though, that he wasn't no Yankee spy, and offered to prove it if I would give him time. But that, you see, was just what I couldn't very well do; the *cannale*," said the major, in good faith for *canaille*, "seemed, somehow, to be getting stirred up about him again. The night after the ball we like to have had a mob around the jail, so I sent him off to the stockade to get rid of him; and he'll be done for there," added the major, with grim composure, "about as effectually as if we'd 'a hanged him. Them poor devils at Andersonville do fare like beasts, there ain't no doubt about that; 'twould be a deuced shame, if there was anything better could be done."

Audley was too much absorbed in the one idea that occupied him to feel just then any philanthropic interest in general

questions of prison discipline, and hastened to bring the major back to the point from which he was wandering.

"And your prisoner," he asked, "this Roby, how did he take the idea of going to Andersonville?"

"He? he knew he couldn't help himself; besides, he seemed to prefer taking his chances there to staying here. The fellow looked to me like he was constantly suspicious of foul play from some quarter, and was glad to be off on any terms. I ain't sure now but he ought to have been hanged, but the rascal was so game that I couldn't have the heart to treat him like a common knave; besides, he didn't have the lingo, and he seemed, too, to know some good Southerners. He asked permission to communicate with General Brockenborough, and wrote a letter to him just before starting, which I mailed myself; but little good it'll do him now."

"Brockenborough! and the news of his death arrived only last night! He was a special friend of mine," said Audley, "and true as steel; you might safely trust any man that he would vouch for."

"Yes, I knew that; but it's too late now; what is it the Bible says about a dead lion ain't worth a dog's nose? and poor Brock's a dead lion now. Halloo! here we are at the house."

After dinner that day, while the gentlemen sat smoking on the piazza, Audley was busy revolving a scheme that had been dimly shaping itself in his brain ever since his conversation with Major Maelstrom about the prisoner. Somehow, he began to feel an unaccountable interest in this vagabond, and the more he thought about him, and the harder he tried to convince himself that there was really nothing extraordinary about the man, the more lively did his curiosity become. The fellow seemed to have been on confidential terms with Brockenborough; that spoke well for him at any rate. Could it really be, as a certain indefinable something about him seemed to imply, that he was not what circumstances would appear to indicate, or was that only an illusion of Audley's imagination? And why was Mr. Harfleur so strangely affected at the sight of him, or what secret stake had he in his destruction?

And then Ruth,—what was the meaning of that ineffable look the stranger had fixed upon her, and Mr. Harfleur's answering deadly glance? The very memory of it thrilled Audley to the heart, and a strange, sickly feeling came over him.

He sat for some time in silence, pondering over all that he had seen and heard, till at last, having finished his cigar, he surprised George and the major in the midst of an interesting discourse upon the physical conditions of the country, with regard to the distribution of venison and wild-turkey, with the abrupt query,—

"George, how far is it from here to Andersonville?"

"I don't know exactly; some sixty or seventy miles, I should say. But what the devil put that into your head?"

"I was thinking I would like to go there, if we could manage it."

"Manage it? why, of course we can, if you like; but why the deuce to Andersonville? Can't you think of any pleasanter place of resort?"

"Well, it isn't exactly the spot I would pitch upon for a pleasure trip," said Audley, lighting a fresh cigar, "but I want to see the stockade; one hears so much of it, and, as a military man, you know, I naturally take an interest in such matters."

"And I, as a military man, unnaturally don't," said George, throwing himself back lazily in his chair and propping his feet on the banisters. "I never had any patience with those meddlesome philanthropists that go poking about into all sorts of uncomfortable places, tormenting themselves about evils they can't prevent; but I'll get up a spirit of active research for a few days to please you. Let's see; by taking the cars at South Ambury we can reach Andersonville early in the afternoon. It's more than a day's journey by private conveyance, but then, if we go up to Winterdale on Saturday to meet Ridgely and Stockdale as we promised, we'll be halfway there already, and might as well go on in our buggies. We can spend Sunday and Monday at Ridgely's plantation,—capital shooting there, major, and no end of fish in the lake; you should taste some of old Mrs. Ridgely's stuffed trout; it's a thing to remember;—and then, Audley, if you like, we'll make Ridgely and Stockdale ride on up to Andersonville with us."

"All right," said Malvern, leisurely watching the blue cloud that escaped from his lips. "Arrange it as you think best; and *à propos*, major," turning to Maelstrom, "I'd like to see that prisoner of yours again if we can find him. I've got a notion in my head that I've seen that fellow before somewhere, and it'll bother me till I make him out; besides, I would like to find out if he really

does know anything about Brockenborough. Is there any way of getting at him, do you suppose, among so many?"

"Oh, yes; I reckon so," replied the major, "unless the scoundrel has changed his name again; and he'd hardly be up to anything of that sort now, I reckon. Besides, I'll know him in a minute if I see him again, and I'd like to find out something more about the chap myself; he's a game-cock, he is."

Matters being thus settled, the young men set out on their expedition at the time appointed, and arrived at the stockade late one afternoon, though still in ample time to be conducted round it before dark. They were courteously received by the officers of the garrison, to most of whom George and his young friends, Ridgely and Stockdale, were well known.

The place has been sketched too often and by too many different hands to need further description here, and to one familiar with the scenery of the pine-lands there is little remarkable about it. After examining the outside defenses of the prison, the visitors expressed a desire to penetrate within; which was readily granted. When they reached the entrance, however, the commandant, who had accompanied them in all their rounds, suddenly withdrew, leaving them to the guidance of two young lieutenants. Colonel Malvern was surprised at this proceeding, until one of the young men, interpreting his look, explained, in an under-tone,—

"He daresn't go in, sir, for his life. They would tear him to pieces if they could get at him, and he knows it."

"Why, that speaks bad for your discipline, lieutenant," said Audley. "I should think those musical instruments yonder," pointing to a battery that crowned a neighboring height, "might be made to exert a more soothing effect."

"It's no fault of the discipline, colonel," said the young guide, touching his hat respectfully, "but the cap'en's so unpopular, you see. He's right hard on 'em, I'm bound to admit, and they hate him so that they would tear him to pieces, if he was to show his face in there, without regard to consequences, though they know they would all be blowed to thunder the next minute."

"And how about the other officers?" inquired Audley. "Is this unpopularity the rule or the exception?"

"Well, they like the gray about as well as a mad bull likes red or a rebel likes blue,—that's natural, you know,—but they don't seem to hate any of the rest of us bad enough to risk the consequences of knocking our brains out."

"Are they tolerably civil to visitors, or do they seem to regard their presence as an intrusion?"

"That depends a good deal upon how the visitors behave themselves," replied the lieutenant. "They're a pretty hard set though at best; and then some allowance must be made for the way they have been bothered by the common people coming here to stare and gab,—these reg'lar sand-hillers and backwoods crackers, sir, that ain't got as much idea how to behave themselves as niggers; none of the better class ever comes here, except the military."

"I am surprised that your officers don't require all visitors to conduct themselves properly," said Audley, severely. "It is due to the honor of the nation to protect its prisoners from insult. I would as soon think of allowing a woman under my charge to be insulted as an unarmed prisoner, were he ten times a Yankee."

"A woman! ah, but there is just the trouble, colonel," replied the lieutenant. "If low-down men was the worst that ever came here, they would be easy enough managed; but when their women come, spitting snuff and jawing around like magpies, what is a feller to do? You can't protect yourself against 'em, much less your prisoners. When a woman goes to cussin', sir, a feller can but stand and take it, you know."

"When a woman goes to cussin'," replied Audley, amused at this new code of gallantry, "I don't think a fellow need be afflicted with any scruples of delicacy regarding her; and if she won't be silenced, she can at least be kept away from where her words will disgrace the nation as well as herself."

"But there is no regulation forbidding anybody to come here. This is a free country, you know, where one man is just as good as another, and so I suppose one woman is too," replied the lieutenant, unconscious of the satire that lay in his words. "But then it is fun," he continued, with a twinkle of boyish mischief in his eye, "to see 'em sometimes when they've been egged on a little. We let the prisoners jaw back at 'em, Tom and me do, when we're on duty; and it's as good as a circus, especially when they get hold of a Dutchman, and cuss away at each other like rips, and neither of

'em don't know what the other's a saying."

Audley eyed the stripling sadly. He was a mere lad, who ought to have been at home spinning tops and flying kites, instead of playing soldier at Andersonville.

"Alas," said Audley to himself, "that the nation has not men enough to do her work, but must drag boys from their trundle-beds before they can discern good from evil!"

He was meditating a lecture to the young scapegrace upon the laws of war, when he was forestalled by the other addressing him,—

"Here comes Father Hammond," he said, indicating a person in the dress of a Romish priest, who was approaching the entrance on his way to the stockade. "If you would like to talk with the prisoners, you had better go in along with him. He's such a favorite with them, they'll be more civil if they see you in his company; and, besides, he can tell you more about 'em than anybody else; he as good as lives here among 'em."

Audley liked the proposal, and the priest having readily agreed to accompany the party, they entered the rude inclosure destined one day to acquire such fatal celebrity. The prisoners, observing the uniforms of the intruders, were at first dogged and sullen, and, though they did not dare to manifest any open discourtesy, it was plain they bore no good will to the wearers of the gray. Father Hammond's presence, however, seemed to create a more favorable impression, which gradually extended itself to his companions. This excellent Christian had devoted himself to the welfare, spiritual and corporal, of the prisoners with the zeal and self-abnegation so characteristic of his order. Night and day was this self-devoted missionary at work among the miserable victims of war, soothing the dying, exhorting the living, and blessing the nameless graves that closed over the enemies of the land he loved,—forgiven now, for the grave knows neither love nor hatred. The influence of the humble priest over those forlorn and degraded men was something almost divine. Wherever he went the poor, wan faces were lighted with smiles, and lips accustomed only to blaspheme were closed in respectful silence or spoke but to crave a blessing. Audley's irresistible charm of manner soon made itself felt here also. Without derogating at all from the dignity of his position as a Confederate officer, he addressed the prisoners with a frankness and good humor that conciliated even the most obdurate, and, while according them the respect due to misfortune, did not fail to inspire at the same time all that was due from inferiors to a superior.

The prisoners were miserably dirty and ragged, and wore a sallow, emaciated aspect,—the natural effect of exposure to a climate unsuited to men of Northern birth, though regarded by natives of the swampy flats below as peculiarly refreshing and salubrious. The visitors soon disposed of all their pocket-money, distributing it among those of the prisoners whose condition most excited their compassion. George even parted with his last cigar, after he had given away everything else, and though the major vehemently declared that, if he had control of the battery up yonder, he'd soon have the whole stockade and every d—d Yankee in it blowed to blazes, by Jove, Malvern observed that his hand went often to his pocket, when he thought nobody was looking, and before the close of their expedition he had contrived to get rid of his hat and his overcoat, too. The cause of this self-spoliation on the major's part was a miserable wretch whose wardrobe had become reduced to a single garment, and that a ragged shirt. The destitute creature, shivering with ague, and reduced by want and disease to a mere skeleton, had, the better to protect his shrunken limbs, run his legs through the sleeves of the shirt, and tied the tail about his neck. His rude companions, rendered callous and brutal, as men always are, by herding together, saw only a subject for ridicule in the forlorn and abject figure of their comrade. Worn out with sickness, and wearied with their coarse taunts, the unhappy man—a sensitive Pole, who understood just enough English to comprehend their brutality—grew weary of his life, and resolved to end it. Covering his face with his hands, he was about to step over the fatal "dead line," full under the muskets of the guard, when he was arrested by the major, and covered with the garments of that ferocious rebel. The major seemed very much ashamed at being caught in the act of giving "aid and comfort" to the enemy, and began to excuse himself as earnestly as if he had been detected in some abominable treachery. "I couldn't help it," he exclaimed, as the rest of the party came upon him; "you'd any of you have done it your-

selves forthe poor devil, you know you would. Confound him, I wish I had let him get his infernal Yankee brains blowed out; but may the Lord forgive me, I couldn't help it. By Jove, Dalton, get me out of this place quick, or I shall begin to feel sorry for these scoundrels."

In the mean time Audley had not forgotten the object of his visit to Andersonville. He began by asking the priest if he knew anything of a man calling himself Dick Roby, and described as well as he could the prisoner's appearance.

"Dick Roby," said Father Hammond, musingly,—"a new arrival, is he not?"

"Yes; was sent up last Tuesday or Wednesday, I think."

"Roby — Dick Roby," repeated the priest. "There was a gentleman here yesterday, a Mr.—I forget his name, making inquiries about the same man. You had better examine the register when we return to headquarters. Such a person did arrive here, I believe, about the time you speak of, but, if I mistake not, he was one of three who made their escape night before last. A very desperate set they were, I am told, and he the most daring of the three; but Mr. Bailley here," indicating the older of the two officers who accompanied them, "can tell you better about these matters than I."

"Oh, yes," said Bailley, hearing himself appealed to; "I was officer of the day when it happened. The men were detailed late in the afternoon to bury some corpses. The garrison has been weakened recently by detachments sent to the coast, so they had to be trusted under the guard of a couple of raw recruits, ''scripts,' at that, who are never very reliable. The rascals contrived to get the better of them somehow,—knocked them down with spades, they say, and then took their arms away; but there's no telling when to believe these fellows, and there is just as likely to have been treachery as violence at the bottom of it. The first squad sent in pursuit tracked them a good way, but didn't succeed in coming up with them."

"I should hardly have thought it possible for prisoners to evade this place successfully," said Audley, glancing round at the defenses. "It must be fully one hundred miles to the nearest Yankee outpost, and they can find no lurking-places, I fancy, among the country people. What point do they generally strike for when they escape?"

"Most of 'em either make directly for the coast or aim at the swamps of the Altamaha, where they join the deserters. There is quite a formidable gang down there, made up of deserters from both armies and birds from our cage, and fugitives stand a much better chance of escape in that direction than any other. Roby and his men started out that way, and the sergeant who went in pursuit said, from the course they took, there must be some one among them thoroughly acquainted with the country. A fresh squad was dispatched this morning, with orders to capture any fugitives they could find, dead or alive. There was a gentleman here yesterday, from some of the lower counties, making inquiries about this same Roby. Harper, I think, was his name; a queer-looking fellow, with gray hair and very dark skin, who complained so bitterly of depredations committed in his neighborhood upon live-stock and corn-cribs by these runaway vagabonds, that the commandant thought he ought to take stringent measures. The gentleman himself seemed to have been one of the chief sufferers, and was very urgent to have the scoundrels brought to justice. He rode off with the squad, and I think it will go hard with any of the rascals he may overtake, though I doubt if Roby and his party can be caught,—they had too much the start, and there is a sharp fellow among 'em, you may depend on that."

Audley hardly knew what to think. He had no difficulty in recognizing Julian Harfleur under the thin disguise of Mr. Harper, nor in seeing through the *ruse* by which he had obtained the sanction of law to some secret purpose of his own. That that purpose was to crush and destroy, Audley could no longer doubt; but why this relentless persecution, this vindictive pursuit, and, above all, why this mortal dread of a creature whom fortune seemed to have placed too low for aught but the pity of a man like Harfleur? What could one so abject have done to deserve his hate? What could he yet do to excite his fear? That there was something between these two men who seemed so far apart, some dark link of hatred, fear, perhaps of crime, Audley felt assured; but the wild conjecture that seized his mind, and filled him, he knew not why, with a strange sense of strange disquiet,—could there be any reason in that? What this wild suspicion was he hardly acknowledged to himself, still, it haunted his mind, and baffled all his efforts to drive it away, or

convince himself that he felt no interest in the matter beyond mere idle curiosity.

Audley was invited, with his companions, to lodge that night at the commandant's quarters, where they were introduced to all the officers of the garrison, and Audley found ample opportunity to make further inquiries about the fugitive, but could elicit nothing more than he already knew.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH.

THAT same night, while Audley Malvern sat comfortably smoking his cigar in the officers' quarters at Andersonville, a man, dusty and way-worn, was hurrying rapidly along the little by-path leading to Aunt Chloe's cabin. He picked his way cautiously through the darkness, often looking behind him, and keeping close to the edge of the brake, until he came directly opposite the old negro's door. He approached cautiously, and looked through a crevice in the wall. The hut was dimly lighted by the flickering glare of a single pine-brand. The sole occupant, an old black woman, dry and shriveled as a mummy, hovered over the embers, crooning to herself one of those dismal, monotonous chants that make up so large a portion of negro psalmody. The man hesitated a moment, then put his hand on the latch, and softly opened the door.

"I must find help here," he said to himself as he entered, "or we will all die of hunger; and to perish now would be to resign justice forever. Yes, yes, I must live a little longer, for her sake."

He moved across the room so noiselessly that the old woman was not aware of his presence till he touched her on the shoulder, and whispered in her ear, "Aunt Chloe."

She started up with a cry, which he smothered by placing his hand over her mouth.

"Don't be frightened, old mauma; you know me now," he said, gently, taking off his hat, and bending so that the firelight fell for a moment full upon his worn and haggard features, revealing a broad, noble forehead, and a pair of strangely flashing dark-blue eyes, that once beheld, could never be forgotten.

The old woman gazed with a look of half terror, half joy, upon the tattered figure before her.

"Yes, yes," she said; "may de Lord have mercy on us, it's——"

"Never speak that name till I come again, and give you leave," said the man, stopping her mouth with his hand. "Yes, I am he you take me for. I am known now, to one at least, and my worst enemy is on my track. Hush, don't ask any questions, but listen to me, and promise, first of all things, that you will never betray the secret of my having been here, even to the person you trust most in the world; if you wish to save the last descendant of your old master's house, promise me this."

"For de love o' de Lord, massa, I promise you everything; but if Massa George Bruen——"

"Hush," said the man, with a darkening countenance. "On your promise I stake my life. No, no more light," as she made a motion to stir the fire; "there is too much for me already. And now, have you anything to eat? I have been in prison; I escaped with two other men; we are pursued and ready to famish. Give me everything you have in the house. I have nothing now to give in return, but keep my secret, and when I come back you shall be well paid."

"Ah, if you would only let me go to Mr. Bruen," the old woman began, pausing in her search for food; "he been a good man, and——"

"Hush!" said the man, sternly; "there is no time for talking now, old mauma, but I'll make everything clear some day, and then you may proclaim me from the housetops if you choose; but quick now, the victuals,—every minute is life and death to me."

The old woman drew a few roasted potatoes from the ashes, produced a pone of corn-bread from under a tin pan, and half a side of bacon from the chimney corner, which she tumbled together into a bag, and the man, having obtained these supplies, hurried back towards the swamps. Two others emerged from the brake as he approached, and began voraciously devouring the food which he distributed to them. They had only tasted a few mouthfuls, when one of the men suddenly started to his feet.

"Hush, Roby; what's that?"

Roby paused an instant in his eating to listen, then flung aside the morsel he was just raising to his lips and sprang to his feet without a word.

"That's Jack's bark," said the first speaker, shaking his head despondently, as the distant baying of hounds was borne on the breeze. "They're upon us again, and it's no use trying now, for Jack never loses the scent."

"Don't give up yet, boys, but follow me," said Roby, suddenly striking off at a rapid pace through the forest. "The creek is only half a mile from here, you can both swim,—hold on to the meat, Lawler,—and now for dear life."

The poor, tired wretches sped on after their leader as fast as their weary limbs would carry them, but the baying grew louder, and they saw that their pursuers were gaining at every step. At last they came so near that the trampling of their horses' hoofs was clearly audible.

"Throw down your bacon, Lawler," cried Roby, "it will divert the hounds a little; and now take heart, yonder is Chickassennee Swamp before us, and no horse can penetrate there."

In another moment they had plunged into the canebrake and were painfully fighting their way among reeds and brambles, and through bogs, in which they sank, often, up to the knees. But theirs was a race for life, and they toiled desperately onward, until they were rewarded at last by a sound of running water.

"Plunge, boys, and make for the other side as fast as you can," said Roby. "You don't hear their dogs now, because they have gone up to the ford to cross,—that's some gain; it 'll give us time to reach the broad lagoon where the old gentleman keeps the pleasure-boat, and once in the boat, we are safe.—God grant they haven't thought of that!"

The water was broad and deep but not very rapid, and by directing their course down-stream the fugitives gained the opposite shore without much difficulty. They were now so exhausted with fatigue and hunger that they could scarcely drag themselves along, but hope buoyed them up, and they toiled eagerly onward till they reached the banks of the lagoon. Lawler sprang forward and caught at a cable that lay coiled upon the ground, then sank to the earth with a cry of despair, for the boat was gone. Even Roby's spirit seemed to fail him under this blow. He flung himself upon the ground and covered his face with his hands, muttering to himself, as he did so, "Lost! all is lost! I must die, and the truth will perish with me."

Their situation, indeed, seemed desperate. The canebrake on this side was sufficiently open for horse to penetrate, and the baying of blood-hounds, which was borne again to their ears, told only too plainly that their enemies were close upon their track. The sound seemed to rouse Roby from a kind of stupor.

"Boys," he said, raising his head with a look of desperate resolution in his face, "are you ready for another plunge?"

"What's the use?" asked Lawler, despairingly.

"Not much, perhaps, but I do know a place of assured safety, if we can get across the lagoon, where we can at least rest ourselves and consider. If you think it worth the effort, follow me."

They crossed by a great effort, Roby and Lawler sustaining their weaker companion between them, and then, taking up the bed of a small wet-weather run that flowed into the lagoon, Roby halted at the end of a few hundred paces before a ledge of earth and limestone that formed a miniature precipice on the left bank. Pushing aside the brush and vines that covered the face of this little cliff, he disclosed an opening near the front about as large as a barrel-head, and, motioning his companions to follow, he began to crawl in upon his hands and knees. The men were startled as they approached the cavity at feeling themselves urged inwards by a strong draught, as though some powerful current were setting in through the mouth, and as they replaced the covering of vines and bushes that had been thrust aside for their entrance the whole mass flew violently back, as if driven by a whirlwind, while loosened leaves and twigs flew past them and went capering down the dark labyrinth. The draught did not diminish as they proceeded, but swept on through the sombre vaults of this subterranean passage with a strange whispering sound like the fluttering of winged spirits in the darkness.

The refuge to which Roby had conducted his companions was a mysterious spot known as the Blowing Cave. It had been observed by old hunters that at certain hours of the day a strong current seemed to set into the cave, sucking in with it any light substances that happened to be near the mouth, while at other times, after regular intervals, a similar current would flow outwards, carrying off, with considerable force, leaves and twigs that were thrust in its way. The ignorant whites knew this singular cavern as the "hole the earth breathes through," and held it in such awe that on no account would they ven-

ture near it; while to the negroes it was the very door to the bottomless pit, and whoever came within the fatal influence of its breath would be sucked down inevitably to the lowest depths of Tartarus. The intelligent whites accounted for the mysterious perflations of the cavern by supposing it to communicate at its other extremity with the gulf, and to be influenced by the ebb and flow of the tides. The chief difficulty in the way of this solution was the great distance, the nearest sea-coast being full a hundred miles off, and it was hard to conceive of any subterranean territory of such stupendous dimensions. However, the vacant channel of some extinct underground stream could afford the necessary communication without supposing a second Mammoth Cave, and it was suggested that Chickassennee Creek might, in prehistoric times, have made its way by that route to the sea, though it had latterly found a more convenient outlet by mingling its waters with the Petaula. But all this was mere conjecture, as no attempt had ever been made to explore the cave, and no human eye, so far as was known, had ever beheld the interior farther than could be seen by looking in through the mouth. The superstitious fears of the ignorant, the lazy indifference of the upper classes, kept either from making any practical investigations. And this remarkable spot, where, if it had been in New England, some enterprising Yankee would have had a toll-gate and a hotel thronged with tourists and bill-stickers, remained an utter solitude, unknown even to the pioneers of "Helmbold's Buchu," or "Sozodont for the Teeth." Everybody had heard of the Blowing Cave, but there were not half a dozen people in the county who had any definite notion of its whereabouts. Even Mr. Bruen, who knew that the entrance was somewhere on his own plantation, was no more able to give the exact locality than to point out the entrance to San Matteo.

Dick Roby plunged fearlessly into the dark womb of this unexplored Avernus. A few yards from the entrance the vault expanded sufficiently for the men to stand upright, and the walls receded from their touch. Roby, however, seemed at no loss which direction to take.

"Step to the right, boys," he said, groping along the wall with his hands, "the walking is better here: it's not so damp; and there's a ledge of rock a little farther on, where we can sit down to rest and talk over our affairs."

The men followed him mechanically. Roby's superior intelligence had established such empire over them that he was tacitly recognized as their chief. There was something about him that inspired respect and commanded obedience from the rude outlaws that chance had made his companions. His garb was as mean as their own, his language as rude, and to all outward appearance he was but a vagabond like themselves; yet, in spite of all this, there was an inherent nobility about him that impressed them, without seeming to assert itself, and made them yield unquestioningly to his guidance. His fertility of invention and readiness of resource, his indomitable courage and perseverance, were qualities that would naturally recommend themselves even to the unlearned, while that singular versatility of manner, by which he seemed to adapt himself instinctively to whatever company he was in, won for him empire over the hearts as well as the minds of men. Yet, his manner, though frank and winning, never invited familiarity; and while he addressed his companions unceremoniously as "Lawler" and "Beckitt," it never occurred to them to take the same liberty with him, but they always accosted him respectfully as Mr. Roby, or more frequently as "cap'en."

But unbounded as was their confidence in their leader, the two men were not insensible to the superstitious terrors of the place, where the wind went whispering through the Stygian caverns with a wild, unearthly sound. Roby explained to them, in a few simple words, how the draught through the cavern was accounted for, and pointed out the great advantage to themselves of this thorough ventilation. Besides, the strong inflow of the current at present would prevent the dogs getting scent of them, even should they chance to track them to the mouth of the cave, which was hardly probable, since the fugitives had not made a step on dry ground since plunging into the lagoon, and had, therefore, left no trail behind.

"Ain't there no danger that the men might take it into their heads to search the cave?" asked Lawler.

"Search the cave! they don't know where to find it," answered Roby. "There ain't a dozen people knows where it is."

"How come you to know, cap'en?" asked Beckitt. "You must 'a ben in these diggins afore."

Roby remained silent a moment, and when he replied it was in an altered voice.

"Yes, I have been in this country before," he said, "a great many years ago. It was then I went a little way into this cave, and I believe I am the only human being that has ever set foot inside of it."

"And good luck you did, cap'en," said Lawler; "but death and hell! what's that?"

They had groped their way round a sharp angle in the wall of the cavern, and as they emerged from its shadow beheld, with wonder and dismay, a dull, reddish glow illuminating the spaces ahead of them. They could not discern from what source the light emanated, but they knew, from the steady, though feeble glow, that it must be stationary; and judged, from the long vista of intervening earthen wall and rocky ledge, that it was a long distance off. The interior of the cavern, as revealed by this unexpected illumination, was like a winding tunnel, stretching, for aught they could see, to infinity in length, but very much circumscribed in its other dimensions. The sides nowhere receded more than a few yards apart, and the roof, in many places, was so low that they could touch it with their hands.

The poor fugitives, however, took little note of these things. Beckitt and Lawler, though endowed with brute courage enough to supply a regiment for battle with foes of honest flesh and blood, quailed at the prospect of an encounter with the ghostly horrors of these Stygian regions, and Roby himself, though he feared not man nor devil, felt his heart sink with dire misgiving. The thought that the secrecy of this last refuge had been violated, that, after so many toils and dangers undergone, hunted and hounded in the very bowels of the earth, their last hope of safety and rest departed, weary, famishing, foot-sore, they might be compelled to fly again, and fly into the very jaws of destruction, filled his soul with bitterness.

Yet, he never once flagged in the strong purpose that seemed to urge him on. Some powerful motive was at work within the man that endowed him with superhuman energy and endurance. Something stronger than the love of life, stronger even than the love of liberty, seemed to impel him onwards. If mere life had been all, he would have yielded it up long ago, as a thing hardly worth struggling for; but it was evident this man felt he had a work to accomplish, and he must not and could not die till it was done.

Speedily recovering himself, after the first shock of surprise and dismay, Roby ordered his companions to stay where they were while he went forward to reconnoitre. Groping his way cautiously, and keeping as much as possible on the shaded side of the cavern, he approached to within a few paces of the spot from which the light proceeded, when he suddenly paused, and felt a cold shiver run over him, for he beheld at his feet a human form, stark and still, huddled up on a bank of soft earth. It was covered over with a blanket, only one foot and leg protruding. Roby held his breath and listened; the stillness was awful; no sound of any voice or motion, save the strange mysterious whispers of the ever-rushing wind. He advanced a few steps farther with the utmost caution, skulking close to the wall, until he reached the jutty of rock from behind which the light seemed to proceed, and, stealing warily to the edge, beheld—not a stream of lurid brimstone, nor a witches' sabbath, nor yet a camp of banditti, but a few peaceful light-wood fagots slowly consuming into dust and ashes. Not far off lay a heap of pine-knots for replenishing the fire at need, while Roby's hungry eyes rested, with eager delight, on a lot of roasted potatoes lying in the ashes, and the half of a freshly-baked hoe-cake, still warm, upon the coals.

A little farther off, on a projecting ledge of limestone that had been made to serve as a pantry-shelf, lay a whole "sides o' bacon," a bag of meal, a tempting leg of fresh pork, and various other articles of diet that seemed to have been laid up by some provident hand for future use. From these signs Roby guessed at once that he had lighted upon the den of a runaway negro, though it was hard to realize that one of that ignorant race could so far overcome his superstitious fears as to inhabit a spot of such evil repute as this dark breathing-hole of the earth.

Taking a torch from the fire, he approached the prostrate figure which had so startled him at first, and commenced removing the blanket in which the sleeper had, like a genuine African, carefully enveloped his head. It took a good many hard thumps and kicks to wake him, and when at last he opened his eyes, he started, with a cry of anguish, to his feet, then, falling upon his knees, began in piteous accents to plead for mercy.

"For de love o' de good Lord God, massa, hab messy on a poor nigger!" implored the miserable fugitive, fancying

himself captured by the negro-hunters. "I was wrong for run away; I was wrong for leave Mass' Julian; I was wrong for steal Misser Bruen's meat," glancing anxiously at the "sides o' bacon." "I know all dat been wrong; but, for de name o' de good Lord, massa, hab some messy, and no give me up to Mass' Julian,—no gi'me up wi'out a word o' messy. I oughtn't to a' runned away, I knows I oughtn't; but Mass' Julian be such a hard man,—hab some messy, good massa, hab messy!" and the poor negro's teeth fairly chattered with terror, as he writhed in the dust at the white man's feet.

"You poor fool," said Roby, gently loosing the sable hands that were clasped about his knees. "I am a runaway myself, and Julian Harfleur"—he almost gnashed his teeth as he uttered the name—"is the last man on the face of the earth that I would seek now; and when we do meet again, it will be to send him forth a fugitive and a wanderer, such as he has made you and me."

The last words were spoken more to himself than to the negro; but, from the fierce vehemence with which they were uttered, it was clear to the dull brain of the latter that the man before him was no friend to his master. It was some time, however, before Roby could pacify him sufficiently to get a coherent sentence out of him. In the mean time, calling his companions, they all three sat down by the fire, and fell upon Cuffee's hoard with the appetites of famished wolves. When they had somewhat appeased their hunger, they turned their attention once more to the negro, who sat watching them the while in wide-mouthed wonder.

"Now, Cuffee," said Roby, with a gleam of humor in his face, that would crop out now and then, even in the most desperate situations, "you seem to have been a very industrious rogue. How long have you been living here?"

The negro scratched his head, and, after pondering over the matter for a few seconds, answered,—

"It must be nigh on to three months, sah."

"What's your name?"

"Grigg Mullins, sah. Mullins is my entitles."

"Your *entitles?*"

"Yes, sah. I nothin' but Grigg all de week in de cotton-patch, but when I for dress up on Sundays and go to church, de black folks all say, 'How you do, Misser Mullins?' Dat's my entitles."

"And you belong to——" Roby paused, and the smile that Grigg's explanation had brought to his lips died away.

"Mass' Julian Harfleur, sah," said the negro, with an involuntary shudder, finishing the sentence for him. "He be a hard man, Mass' Julian be, an' everybody know it. He been a poor man when our young missis marry him, what never hab no niggers o' his own, and so him dunno how for treat black folks. Poor buckrah always mean to black folks. If t'other one had done come back what Miss Nettie want for her husband, he been a good massa to us. De white folks all say he been a bad man, what run off an' lef' her; but he always mighty good to black folks,—just like ole massa be, and Misser Bruen, and Judge Dalton, and all dem quality genlemen what been used to hab niggers all dey life, and I don't b'lieve him been no ole poor buckrah, what ole massa call him. Ah, if he hadn't gone off and got hissef killed, dis nigger wouldn't be no runaway dis day."

Roby suddenly rose and retired to one of the dark recesses of the cavern. Something in the agitation of his manner seemed to alarm the negro.

"I ain't mean no harm, massa," he began, deprecatingly, as Roby resumed his seat by the fire. "I ain't no disrespect to Mass' Julian, and I don't mean for to talk 'bout t'other one no more. 'Twas all 'long o' talkin' 'bout him to Misser Tadpole dat Mass' Julian hab me put under de screw."

"Under the screw," said Lawler; "what's that?"

"De screw, dat whar dey packs cotton. Dey put you in de box jest so," doubling himself up in a posture that was neither sitting, nor standing, nor lying. "Dey let de screw down on you jist so low you can't move, and den dey lef' you dar all day and all night, and when you git out, Misser Tadpole he come and preach at you 'bout your sins."

"That man Harfleur would see his own mother sawn asunder without a shudder," said Roby, "if it served his purpose. Oh, my God, what a thing it is to be defenseless in his hands!" He pressed his fingers to his brow, and groaned aloud with uncontrollable anguish. His comrades looked startled.

"And you say he's one o' the men pursuing of us, cap'en?" asked Lawler.

"Yes, I think so," said Roby, in a tone of indifference which showed it was no sense of personal danger that disquieted him; then, as if desirous of

changing the subject, he turned to Grigg and asked, with forced jocularity,—

"How came you to hide in this den, Grigg? Weren't you afraid the devil would catch you?"

"Yes, sah, massa," answered Grigg; "I mighty 'feered at first; but when I hear de hounds a comin' closer an' closer, an' when I think how massa gwine look when I'se brought to him, an' how he gwine say, 'Take him to de overseer,' an' how de overseer gwine say, 'Put him in de screw,' I ain't thought no more 'tall 'bout no devil, but jest jump right in de cave, and den I see dere ain't be no Satam here."

"You must know the cave well by this time," observed Roby.

"Yes, sah; dere ain't no sort o' sperrits in here."

"And how big is it?"

"Tain't got no eend."

"You've been a long way down there?" pointing towards the back of the cave.

"Better'n six mile."

"How do you know you went six miles?"

"'Cause de place whar I come out at is way down on Misser Elmore's plantation, and dat been always called seven mile from Sandowne."

The three white men fixed their eyes eagerly upon the face of the negro.

"How!" exclaimed Roby; "is there another place to get out of this cave besides the one we got in at?"

"I done made one," said Grigg, with a grin of pleasure. "You see, massa, I been oneasy all de time for fear somebody come in here, since dere ain't no Satam here, and so I keep a lookin' for some other way to git out; and I keeps a-gwine, and a-gwine, and a-gwine tell I comes to whar I sees some roots a-hangin', and den I knows de top o' de ground ain't been fur off; an' so I digs, an' digs, an' digs for more'n two week, tell at las' I comes out right in de side of a big lime-sink; den I hide de hole I made wi' a rock and some brush so nobody ever find it."

"And you know all the country round, well?"

"Know it? I knows it like a huntin'-dog. De river ain't a hunderd yard off from whar I come out; and many's de night I'se been miles down it a-fishin', in Misser Elmore's boat, and back agin afore day."

The fugitives regarded each other with sparkling eyes.

"Do you always find the boat on the river when you go there?" asked Roby.

"Yes, sah. All de genlemen 'long de river-bank got boats; easy as dirt to find one."

Roby rose and faced the negro. "Look at me, Grigg," said he, impressively. "I do not promise to set you free nor to enrich you with your master's spoils. I have no right to do that; but save you from injustice and cruelty I can. Now, Grigg, would you like to go where your Mass' Julian will never set eyes on you again; or where, if he did, he wouldn't dare to raise his finger against you?"

"Oh, massa!" cried Grigg, almost speechless with delight.

"Well, then, guide us to this opening; show us where to find a boat; follow us; and if we ever reach a place of safety ourselves, you shall share it with us."

"De Lord bless you, massa! de Lord be praised!" And Grigg fell on his knees in the overflowing thankfulness of his heart.

Full of hope, the tired fugitives stretched their weary limbs upon the mould of the cavern, and, lulled by a sweet sense of peace and security that they had not known for many a week, fell asleep just as day was dawning upon the outer earth.

In the gray dawn of that same morning a rider was urging his wearied steed up the winding avenue that led to the White House. His face was pale and haggard, with a stern, set look about the mouth and a fierce fire flashing in the dark eyes,—usually so fixed in their cold steely glitter.

The sleepy groom, waiting at the stable-door, sprang trembling to his feet as his master halted and flung the reins into his hand. He stared hard at the horse's reeking sides, and shook his woolly head as his master stalked moodily away to the house and bolted himself in his own room.

"Davy," said the groom, in an ominous whisper to the stable-boy, "there'll be bad times for the folks to-day. Mass' Julian's been a-hunting, and ain't took nothin', and you know he's always humorsome when he misses the game."

CHAPTER XXVII.

FILTHY LUCRE.

When Audley returned to Sandowne he found a note from Claude Harfleur, informing him of the arrival of his

mother and sister, who she had contrived should be her guests, and inviting him to join them at the White House. Upon hearing this news George Dalton set out immediately, under plea of urgent business engagements, for South Ambury, where he established himself in his lodgings, and resisted all inducements to return to the neighborhood of the White House. He accounted to Mr. Bruen for his absence by various pretexts of business,—an accommodating fiction, worn so threadbare by dissipated young men that it is a wonder how the honest old folks can still be imposed on by it. But Mr. Bruen believed in George as firmly as in the last quack medicine, and with about as much reason the world thought; and while that young man was scandalizing the respectability of South Ambury with one of his wildest sprees, the old gentleman was saying complacently to his wife,—

"I tell you what, Margaret, I was right; that boy's coming round now. Every note I get from him is full of nothing but business, and he's so given up to it he can't even find time to spend a Sunday at home. By gad, sir,—and I beg your pardon for swearing,—he'll be as good a business-man as I am before he dies."

Though Mr. Bruen had often been warned that his nephew was not quite as "steady" as could be desired, he never doubted that the young man would "come round," as he expressed it, in good time. Mr. Bruen never lost faith in the virtue of growing older and getting married, though George had now reached an age at which men are usually as married and settled as they are ever going to be. As Mr. Bruen himself was growing older quite as steadily as his nephew, the chasm between them was not narrowed by the young man's advance; and the old one hardly realized that he was not still a boy, with ample time to sow his wild oats and then arrive at years of discretion. He would give George awful blowings up now and then about his goings on, which the young man received with a coolness and *nonchalance* that invariably silenced the old gentleman's artillery for want of fire to touch it off.

Audley Malvern was too well acquainted with his friend's character not to guess at the true cause of George's absence from home. He had tried his best to warn Julia in time to keep her from accepting Claude's invitation, but the letter he at last got written miscarried, and Julia had the mortification of finding herself, when it was too late, a guest in the house of George Dalton's friends. She could not even avoid frequent visits to Sandowne, for Mr. Bruen, who knew nothing of her connection with George, took a great fancy to her and insisted on having her often at his house.

No mention had been made of Audley's sister between the two young men since their first interview on the night of his arrival at Sandowne, but he had seen enough then to convince him that George's resentment, like his wrong, was incurable. The very depth of his love added bitterness to his anger against the woman who had trifled with it. Audley appreciated the inherent beauties of his friend's character, warped and blurred as they were by long indulgence in habits of vice. He felt that George would never have voluntarily deserted Julia for any earthly consideration. She might have lost fortune, station, beauty, reason itself, still, that strong, faithful heart would never have swerved in its allegiance. Beauty and wealth had lured him all his life in vain; nothing but her own hand had power to snap the chain that bound him to her, and with it to loosen the evil genius that lurks in some hidden corner of every human heart.

George was very far from being what women term a manageable man. He was a strong, original character, with a vein of eccentricity about him that few people could understand, much less pretend to influence. Julia Malvern was, perhaps, the only woman in the world capable of exercising sway over such a complex, contradictory nature, and hers had been unbounded, both for good and evil. A woman of rare intellectual endowments, Julia's lofty ambition gave to George's indolent, but far from feeble temper, just the spur that it needed. In person she was not remarkable for beauty, but there was a majestic, queenly grace about her that accorded exactly with her character. She was not a great belle in the ordinary acceptation of the word, nor was she even generally popular. Ordinary men were afraid of her, for they felt her superiority, and there is nothing that the mediocre man resents so bitterly as superiority in a woman. But she never failed to win whenever she chose to exert herself, and if the mass of mankind were not her adorers, it was simply because she did not think them worth the trouble of gaining. She used to say it was a greater feat to captivate one fool than

twenty wise men; and in her case this was no doubt true, for to Julia's lofty nature it was easier to soar than to crawl.

But this aspiring disposition, the germ of so much that is grand and noble in man, whose career affords opportunities for its gratification, is apt to degenerate in women, confined as they are to a meagre sphere, into a sordid, ignoble passion. Julia Malvern, suddenly deprived of the social autocracy to which she was born, and which, philosophize as we will, it is impossible to maintain under the present constitution of our social system without money, keenly felt her altered circumstances, and her ambition, diverted from more congenial fields, was now intent only upon regaining the brilliant but hollow pre-eminence she had lost. Ambitious to a fault, even in her better days, all her lofty aspirations had now degenerated into cold worldliness, under which the warm and womanly part of her nature seemed for the time to lie torpid,—torpid only, let us hope, not dead.

When Audley thought of his friend's wrecked and wasted life, he felt disposed, tenderly as he loved his sister, to attach to her her full measure of blame. And then, after all, to go and take up with an inflated old booby like Bagpipe! She, who had refused some of the best offers in the land, jilted and ruined a splendid fellow like George, and then to go and marry a confounded old ass for his money! What creatures women are! It is true, he meant to marry for money himself some day, but then he was going to choose some woman he could be decently in love with,—indeed, he intended to do the thing in quite a genteel way, and why couldn't Julia have some sense about it, too? She was a sensible woman in everything else, why should she turn fool about the most important step in her life? The more he thought it over the more irritated he felt, and he determined to give Julia a talk; not that there was any hope of making it up between her and George,—his bad habits were too confirmed now to think of such a thing. Audley could not wed his sister to such a profligate, even if it were possible to close the breach that pride, wrong, and mutual resentment had opened between them. But it might not be too late to bring her to her senses about old Bagpipe, and, at any rate, he was irritated and dissatisfied with things in general, and what is the use of having a sister if you can't scold her when you are out of humor?

The first few days after Julia's arrival were so occupied in receiving calls and exchanging civilities with the neighboring families, that the brother and sister had no opportunities for confidential interviews. The first occasion that presented itself for a good private talk was one evening while they were on a visit to Sandowne. Audley had stepped on the piazza to smoke his after-dinner cigar; Julia followed, and, locking her arm in his, walked up and down the piazza with him while he smoked. They gossiped away for some time on indifferent topics, till Audley, taking advantage of the pause, introduced the subject of his thoughts by asking,—

"Well, Julia, what do you intend doing with old Bagpipe? Are you really going to have him, or are you only fooling him?"

Julia's countenance changed. "Fooling him," she answered, in a bitter tone; "fooling him worse than I ever fooled any man before, for I am going to let him marry me."

"And when is this precious engagement to be consummated?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Julia, with a gesture of impatience, as though she would fain avoid the subject. "Some time about the first of May, I suppose."

"I would suggest the first of April as a more appropriate time," said Audley, with a sneer. "Julia, why will you persist in choosing for a husband that miserable piece of empty-headed pomposity? It is impossible that you can entertain a particle of respect for him."

"Impossible? Of course it is. I am not fool enough to respect such a man," said Julia, with a bitter laugh.

"And yet you are going to commit a greater folly," replied her brother. "Have you no other admirers, Julia, that you must put up with that inflated old gas-bag?"

"None that can offer such solid arguments in favor of matrimony."

"And pray what are some of those arguments?"

"Three seasons in Paris or London, whichever I choose, ten thousand a year pin-money, and all expenses paid."

"Umph! the terms seem liberal enough, but when you think of the husband that must be thrown in to complete the bargain, I can't help thinking you might have made a better speculation."

"Might have made,—ah, yes," said Julia, with a half-suppressed sigh; "but you forget that at twenty-eight the mar-

ket value of a woman is on the decline. In less than two years I shall have turned the dark corner that leads around thirty,—that horrible era in a woman's life when she begins to be unquestionably middle-aged, and it is not likely I shall bring even ten thousand a year with a gouty husband after that."

"Julia, do you desire nothing better than so many thousands a year?"

"It is not what I desire that is the question now," said Julia, sadly. "My life is ruined and wasted any way, and I am only choosing to be rich and miserable instead of poor and miserable. Besides," she added, suddenly changing her tone to one of forced levity, "what difference does it make after all? You see people marry for money every day, as well as for love, and they all jog along together in pretty much the same humdrum fashion by the time they have been ten years married. The heroine of a love romance must come down at last to minding babies and sewing on buttons, woman's inevitable destiny, as prosaically as any of us; indeed, I am not sure but, in the long run, Mrs. Major-General Bagpipe, with her velvet and Venice point, her villa on the Hudson, her palace in Madison Square, her brilliant *salons* in Paris, will get quite as much of the romance of married life as any poor little dupe of a love-match, who wakes up after the honeymoon and finds herself tied to one who is but a mortal man after all, and not a hero or a demi-god at all. If no man is a hero to his valet, who can be one to his wife?"

"But I am not insisting upon your marrying a hero or a demi-god," said Audley. "I am as skeptical about them as you, perhaps. Still, a man more the reverse of a hero than old Bagpipe it would be impossible to name; a disgusting old libertine, of twice your years, who has already buried three wives; a fool, a knave, and a coward to boot."

"For that reason I feel the less compunction in marrying him," said Julia. "I would not have the heart to take in a decent man so mercilessly, but, if old General Bagpipe is all you say, he deserves no better than to be converted into an appendage for paying bills and covering indiscretions."

"Julia! Julia!" cried her brother, seizing both hands and looking her sternly in the face, "if I really thought you meant what your words imply I would tie a millstone about your neck and cast you into the river yonder. But lay aside your levity, my sister, and think what will be the consequences of this marriage even in a worldly point of view. I am not at all disposed to underrate the advantages of wealth, you know, and would never countenance a *mésalliance* for you, as regards either fortune or family, any more than I would think of making one myself; but what satisfaction can all the allurements of wealth give when you are tied to a man whom all decent people must despise? Sacrifice love for money if you will, but honor never. Ah, Julia! I make no pretense at being a philosopher, I do not set up to despise the good things of this world, but I cannot help thinking that stupid, honest, contented poverty is better than the life to which you are about to sell yourself."

Audley's heart was nearer right than he knew, and he pleaded for the truth with an earnestness that would have astonished himself if he had stopped to think at all about it. Julia drew her hands from her brother's, and pressed them a moment nervously to her forehead.

"Contented poverty!" she repeated, in a scornful, almost angry tone. "I hate the canting, ignoble words! Contentment is the virtue of base, contracted minds, and as for poverty, you may be crushed and broken under it, but there is no such thing as contentment with it. I have tried it now for four years, and the more I know of it the less contented I grow."

"I have tried it, too, Julia, as long as you, and——"

"Ah, but with you men it is so different," interrupted Julia. "There are so many careers open to you, so many doors of escape, that you are not obliged to marry for money. Your career has not been cut short by our reverse of fortune. You have earned glory and fame in spite of our poverty, and that is better than riches. But the social arena is the only one open to woman's ambition; and who can enter there without money? There are no honorable professions open to us; the utmost we can do for ourselves is to maintain a plodding respectability, and I hate respectability. I would not care if I were a *poissarde*, or a washerwoman, for there is something admirable in the sturdy Bohemianism that snaps its fingers in the face of gentility and lives in blessed ignorance of respectability. Or if I had a literary genius like Mme. de Staël, or a voice like Ruth Harfleur, I could endure being a woman and poor,

for genius knows no sex, and I could then shake off the trammels of mine. Even if I were a piece of plodding mediocrity, suited to the mental tread-mill of the school-room, I might be contented and eminently respectable; but being neither a genius nor an imbecile, there is no place for me in the economy of woman's existence. There is no middle ground for us women except marriage,—no door of escape from the miseries of poverty and dependence. I have tried to open others for myself. I have tried every kind of 'honest labor' that a woman in my situation could put her hand to, but am utterly unsuited to them all. For two horrible years I submitted my mind to the tread-mill and taught in a country school, but outraged all my patrons, and finally lost my place and my reputation, because I couldn't help boxing the ears of their precious offspring,—horrid little wretches with dirty finger-nails and smelling of perspiration; I wonder I could touch them. I rose a step after that, and turned *modiste*, and might have redeemed my fortune trimming bonnets, but everything went wrong because I could not learn to keep my accounts straight. Then I tried writing in a petty Government office, but flirted with the head of the department, and his wife got me turned out. Next I tried teaching music, but lost all my scholars before the first quarter was ended because—well, I suppose it must have been because I didn't know anything about music myself. And so, now, here I am, a pensioner on the bounty of George Dalton's relations, as if I had not submitted to humiliations enough without that. Oh, Audley, can you blame me for marrying anybody to escape the like of this?" She covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

Audley bent down and kissed his sister's forehead. A pang of wounded pride wrung his own bosom, but he would not add to Julia's humiliation by confessing his own.

"No, no, sister," he said, with affected cheeriness, folding his arms tenderly round her; "things look bad, but they are not desperate yet. Remember that you have a brother, and though the claims of my country and the walls of a prison have barred me from you long, yet if ever my hands are free, I hope, Julia, I will be man enough at least to raise you above the necessity of marrying old Bagpipe. Now that you are here it can't be helped, but you need not stay long. I know where I can find employment that will make you at least independent till I can come back and take care of you myself. I have a friend in South Ambury,—a Major Maelstrom,—who can, no doubt, give you a place. He has several female clerks in his department, and as he is a single man, you can flirt with him as much as you choose without any danger of being turned out. In fact, if you are bent upon speculating in the matrimonial market, I think you would find him a much better investment than old Bagpipe. He is a rich old bachelor, generous and good-natured, and though he does smell of stale tobacco and put his knife in his mouth when he eats, that's not half so bad as old Bagpipe's gouty feet and perfumed wig. I commend the project to your thoughtful consideration."

"My mind is already made up," said Julia, firmly; "but come," she continued, assuming her brother's bantering tone, "I'm tired of talking about myself, it's your turn now to undergo a little catechising. Have you no ventures of your own in the matrimonial market? It is high time you were thinking about 'getting settled,' as the old women say."

"Well, I have been looking around me a little since I came here," said Malvern, suppressing a yawn, "and I should not be surprised if I came to business before long. What do you think of Miss Harfleur?"

"Which one?"

"The beauty, of course."

"That's too indefinite; they are both so handsome that it might easily be a disputed point which is prettiest."

"Oh, the younger sister is the recognized beauty."

"Indeed! I am glad you mean her; I was afraid it might be the other."

"Afraid? Why do you say that?" asked Audley, with sudden petulance.

"Because," answered Julia, "I know of old your hankering after forbidden fruit, and the stain upon this young lady's birth, and her absolute want of fortune, render her sufficiently ineligible to turn your head."

"So you have dived to the bottom of that scandal already, have you?" said Audley, sharply. "Pray, Julia, who retailed this precious bit of gossip to you?"

"Mamma."

"Mother! And how the deuce did she get at it? Surely she would not be guilty of prying into the family secrets of her host."

"No; but mamma and Mr. Bruen used

to be great friends, you know, when they were young, though they have not heard of each other for years until now, and he took her into his confidence as soon as she came. I half suspect his motive was that she might put you on your guard, for nobody can help seeing how you admire the girl; but I see you have been warned already."

"Oh, yes, I'm all right," said Audley, laughing; "I don't admire her more than I do every pretty girl I meet; and, besides, I am falling in love with the younger sister as fast as I can. She's a tremendous catch, and I've pretty well made up my mind to take her."

"And I suppose there is no doubt about her taking you?" said Julia, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

Audley had never thought of that before, but now that he did think of it, he saw no reason to doubt, and answered accordingly,—

"No, I believe not."

"That's like the abominable vanity of your sex," cried Julia; "I almost wish she'd refuse you, just for saying that; but no, then you'd fall a prey to her charming sister, that mamma is so uneasy about. She has said to me a dozen times a day, 'My dear, you know how fond Audley is of music, and he always did have a fancy for blondes, and you know he can be very unmanageable sometimes, when he takes a whim. Really, it's a shame that these penniless beauties are permitted to be turned loose upon society.'"

"That's so!" cried Audley, laughing. "They ought to be kept in barrels, and fed through the bung-hole, till they are too old to lure poor devils like me to their destruction."

"But think, what would become of me, then?" said Julia, archly.

"Oh, some fellow would knock the head off your barrel to get you out," said Audley, caressing her. "But no matter," he added, "I'm all right without the barrel—you need feel no uneasiness on my account."

"I never have," said Julia, proudly; "though I can't help pretending to, sometimes, just to worry mamma; but my brother will never disgrace his family by a *mésalliance*, when he knows that we all look to him to build up its fortunes once more."

"By marrying a rich wife," added Audley, with a sardonic laugh; and somehow he began to feel contemptibly small in his own estimation, and for the first time in his life he felt ashamed of his pet theory of matrimony.

"Oh, but this is not a flagrant, vulgarly, mercenary match like mine," said Julia. "Claude Harfleur is a woman that men would go mad about if she were as poor as Ruth or I, and surely money cannot detract from her charms."

"No, certainly not," said Audley, absently. "I am very creditably in love with her already. I'll go over to the White House and bring the matter to a crisis to-morrow morning."

He kissed his sister once more, then turned and walked moodily away to his own room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW AUDLEY MALVERN COMMENCED BRINGING THINGS TO A CRISIS.

NEXT morning, Audley mounted the riding-horse that was kept always at his disposal and started off for the White House, with the meritorious intention of following up the good impression he had already made upon its fair young mistress. He must have been deeply absorbed in reflections by the way, for on approaching the little log church that stood on the confines of Mr. Harfleur's estate, he started, like one awaking from a dream, at the sound of Ruth Harfleur's voice within, chanting a plaintive requiem from Handel's "Messiah." He reined in his steed a moment, then spurred it on again till he was almost out of hearing, then turned back, paused, wavered, and finally sprang to the ground, and, throwing the lines across his arm, advanced to the gate, and, resting his elbows on the railing, stood listening to the siren's voice.

Ruth was in the habit of resorting frequently to this quiet spot, which, in spite of the alarm she had received on her first visit, seemed to possess a strange sort of fascination for her. She never ventured there alone after that singular rencontre, but always found a willing companion in Bruen. The boy's first capricious fancy for his sister had ripened into the tenderest affection, which, if disposed to be a little tyrannical and exacting at times, was warm and sincere, and very precious to the lonely exile whose life had been so barren of tender ties.

Ruth had early discovered in the boy a wonderful talent for art. It is true his sketches were for the most part rude and grotesque; nor were the subjects of them generally of an exalted character, being confined chiefly to caricatures of the pious young man called Tadpole, burlesques of his school-fellows, of his aunt and uncle even, of everybody, in short, except his father, with whose features he had never dared to take such a liberty since a servant had once detected Mr. Harfleur's face on the fly-leaf of an old account book, attached to a form the very *fac-simile* of Bruen's own.

But whenever the boy's genius got the better of his malice and led him to loftier studies, his drawings—notwithstanding a certain crudeness and want of finish—possessed a vividness and originality that gave promise of rare powers. His genius had shared the common neglect that left all his gentler qualities to be choked by the rank outgrowth of a morbid and passionate nature, but it was too deeply rooted to be quite trampled out. He had never been instructed in the barest rudiments of drawing; and no one—not even himself—had any suspicion of the wonderful power that lay dormant within him until Ruth, one day, taking up a paper on which he appeared to have been scribbling, found on it a singularly life-like and picturesque sketch of the weird old negro Chloe. Though nothing of a painter herself, Ruth's æsthetic mind recognized at once the signs of genius lurking in Bruen's crude delineation, and she set to work to give him such instruction in the elements of drawing as she had herself received. The boy was delighted, and, even with this meagre tuition, made rapid improvement in his art. He seemed inspired, all at once, with a genuine enthusiasm for it, and his conceptions became purer and more elevated. He seemed to draw a kind of inspiration from music, and would make his sister sit at the piano for hours, while he was busy with his pencil.

In fine weather they were both fond of spending their mornings at the little church among the pines; and when they tired of reading or talking together Ruth would seat herself at the organ, while Bruen took his station at an open window and busied himself with pencil and portfolio. On the particular morning to which this chapter refers, he became so absorbed in his work that he seemed not to perceive when Ruth ceased playing until she rose from the organ and went and laid her hand on his shoulder. As she did so she stooped to examine his work, and saw that he was just finishing a pencil sketch of herself as Juliet. He was fond of investing the people he knew with fanciful characters; and Ruth was so accustomed to seeing her own features figuring on the shoulders of nymphs, fairies, saints, madonnas, and the like, that she was not at all surprised at the garb he had given her; but there was a beauty and gracefulness in the sketch that struck her more than any of his efforts had done. The listless abandon of the attitude, the warm, impassioned expression of the upturned face that seemed to glow with the very soul of love, impressed her so that she could not repress an exclamation of admiration. Bruen laughed.

"I am glad you like your own face so well," he said; "can't you see that it is you?"

"Taken from mine; yes, but you don't really mean that I ever look like that?"

Bruen nodded. "Sometimes when you are playing that symphony of Beethoven's that Colonel Malvern admires so much, or that love-song from Ione,—especially if he sings it with you."

Ruth felt that the boy was eying her closely, and turned away her face to hide her changing color.

"You have made me out a great beauty," she continued, in a careless tone, appearing not to notice his allusion to Malvern; "but I have no right to be vain about it, since your hand can beautify whatever it touches."

Bruen was silent a moment, then shoved the picture from him with a sigh.

"What's the matter now?" said Ruth, taking up the portfolio he had thrown aside. "Are you out of humor with your work already?"

"Not with my work; no, I love that better every day I live. I was only thinking how hard it is that one who can, as you say, beautify whatever he touches,—one who worships the beautiful; who lives in it and for it,—should himself be what I am. My own creations seem a perpetual reproach to me," said the boy, glancing down at his shrunken, misshaped limbs. "And that this should have happened, of all the world, to one who aspires to be an artist!" he added, bitterly.

"And yet worse things have happened to artists," said Ruth, running her fingers carelessly through his beautiful hair. "There is Beethoven, whose music you admire so much, he was deaf as a stone

at thirty, so that he could never hear a musical sound."

"And did not his art die out of him then?"

"By no means. The stupendous mass in D, and the beautiful symphony that Colonel Malvern admires so much, were both composed when he could not tell the sound of a kettle-drum from a guitar. Art lives in the soul, Bruen; and if the soul of the artist be pure and his faith strong, he can create a world, a life of beauty, for himself."

"That all sounds very fine," said the boy, impatiently; "but you can't make me believe that artists don't feel their personal defects more keenly than other people. I can't tell how it is, but you would know, Ruth, if you were yourself a victim to the very misfortune that you were calculated to feel most bitterly of all. Suppose, for instance, that you were deaf, like Beethoven——"

"Or suppose you were blind, would not that be worse than——"

"Why not suppose something a little more cheerful?" cried a laughing voice outside; and, looking round, they saw Audley Malvern standing in the open door.

"I have been eavesdropping," he continued, making a step or two towards them; "but as I have not overheard any secrets, I hope I may be forgiven and allowed to present myself in a more respectable character. May I?" he asked, pausing, with his hand on the back of a pew, and looking at Ruth.

Bruen scowled and turned away. Ruth nodded assent and turned away too, but not with a scowl. Availing himself of her permission, Audley seated himself on the pew close at her side, and, taking Bruen's portfolio from her lap, proceeded leisurely to examine the contents. Audley had beheld all the rarest works of art of the Old World, and, being a thorough *connoisseur*, his cultivated eye immediately detected the evidences of genius that abounded in Bruen's sketches. His first feeling of surprise was soon succeeded by one of amusement at the free use the boy had made of his various acquaintances and the significant characters with which he had invested them, though he was not particularly edified at detecting his own features under the disguises of Don Juan and Paris of Troy, while he started once with a kind of terror at the sight of Claude Harfleur's beautiful face staring at him amid the snaky tresses of Medusa.

While examining these crude but singularly promising specimens of art, Audley had gradually drawn the young artist into conversation. His evident interest in the contents of the portfolio had mollified Bruen somewhat and disposed him to answer civilly the first few questions Audley put to him. Gradually he became more communicative, and listened attentively to all Malvern had to say. The latter was himself an accomplished draughtsman. He saw the boy's want of direction, and, after praising what was really commendable in his work, ventured to point out in a friendly way one or two of the errors that repeated themselves most frequently. Seeing that Bruen received these corrections not merely with a good grace, but with the avidity of one eager to learn, he went on criticising one sketch after another, and initiated Bruen into the mysteries of foreshortening, perspective, chiaro-oscuro, and other technicalities of art, with such ease and simplicity that no one would ever have suspected those hard words to have anything to do with what he was talking about. Then he went on to speak of the great masters whose works he had seen abroad, and described the masterpieces in the galleries of Rome and Munich, the marbles of the Vatican Museum, the wonders of St. Peter's and the Milan Cathedral, with a vividness and eloquence that charmed both his hearers.

Suddenly he paused in the midst of his description of the Sistine Chapel, and fixed his eyes attentively upon a little sketch that rested in his hand, then raised them deliberately to Ruth's face. Bruen leaned forward to see what had attracted his attention, and recognized the Juliet which Ruth had, by a sudden impulse she could not herself have accounted for, hastily thrust into the portfolio as Malvern entered.

"You know it too, I see," said Bruen, following the direction of Audley's eyes. "Do you think it a good likeness?"

"Perfect," said Malvern, fixing his eyes again on the picture. "You have made an exquisite little sketch here, Bruen; there's genuine inspiration in it."

"So Ruth thinks; you'd have laughed to hear how she was admiring her own face just now," said Bruen, with a twinkle of real boyish fun in his eye.

"I don't wonder," murmured Audley, stealing a glance at the fair face in question.

"Now, Bruen," cried his sister, blushing, "you ought to explain that it was

not my face, but your work, I was admiring; I scarcely observed the likeness at all."

"It is very striking, nevertheless," said Malvern; "and he has caught the expression that I admire most."

"Does she ever look at you that way?" asked Bruen, sharply.

If anything could have made Ruth lose patience with her brother, that question would have done it. She rose hastily, and commenced running her fingers over the keys of the organ to hide her embarrassment. Audley colored deeply, but did not lose his self-possession.

"No," he answered, laughing. "I wish to heaven she would! but she has only frigid and forbidding looks for me. I wish you would give me this picture, to remind me that she is capable of looking otherwise,—may he, Miss Harfleur?"

"No," answered Ruth, decisively.

"Not even if I vow and declare that it is only as a work of art, and not at all as your portrait, I value it?"

She answered by taking the sketch from his hand, and shoving it, almost angrily, between some loose sheets of music lying on the organ. She was vexed at Bruen's impertinence, and Ruth could not always conceal her temper when it was roused.

"She shall give it to me yet," muttered Audley to himself, as he reluctantly resigned the picture; then, rising and standing behind her at the organ, he said, with an air of comic resignation, "Well, since you won't let me look, I suppose I may listen; let us have some music to console me for my disappointment,—it is greater, perhaps," he added, in an under-tone, "than you imagine."

"Here is the Funeral March from Samson, then, perhaps that will accord with your feelings," said Ruth, resuming her playful manner, as she struck the first chords on the organ.

"Why is it," said Audley, when she had finished, "that all your music is so sad? And yet you don't seem to be by nature of a melancholy temperament."

"You forget, my music is not always melancholy; there is the Magnificat, and Jubilate, and the Coronation, anthems from——"

"Oh, but they are all in that stately oratorial style. Sacred music is all grand and stately, and you hardly ever play anything else; you seem to have no taste for what, in the absence of a better term, I suppose I may style the 'light literature' of music."

"I had never thought of that before," said Ruth, meditatively; "I suppose it is partly due to education, and partly because I am a born musician, and cannot help loving what is highest and best in my art. Only grand and lofty passions can be appropriately expressed in music: the burlesque has no legitimate place there: a comic song is a desecration, almost a blasphemy."

"But all lofty emotions are not necessarily religious," said Audley. "There are love, hope,—joy itself, you must grant, may be a very exalted feeling."

"Yes, but they all find their highest development in devotion. Art is religion, and since men have lost their faith art is dying out of the world. Those great works you have just been describing to us—the cartoons of Raphael, the Last Supper of Leonardo, the Madonnas of Perugino—all belong to an age of faith, and are symbols of the pure faith, the lofty devotion, of those golden days in which the artists lived. Nay, even those wonderful relics of ancient art—the Laocoon, the Apollo, the Venus de Medici—were inspirations of the mythology that is the religion of the ancients. There can be no art without religion, without faith, and that is why the classic music that I love is mainly devotional. But I didn't mean to deliver a lecture on art," she continued, blushing at her own enthusiasm, "and it must be getting late."

"Only half-past one," said Audley, referring to his watch.

"Dear me! and I hardly supposed it was twelve yet. Come, Bruen, we must be going."

"And may I have the pleasure of seeing you home?" asked Malvern.

"We are not going home now. Bruen and I have a little expedition to make. Our old friend Aunt Chloe is sick; we thought we would drive over to see her, and then go to Sandowne to dinner. We shall find you at the White House when we return in the evening?"

"No, I was not going there to dinner," said Audley; "so I'll ride along with you, if you've no objection."

"None in the world, if you don't mind stopping by the way; and we sha'n't detain you long at Aunt Chloe's."

"The longer I am detained in such company the better," whispered Audley, as he assisted her into Bruen's pony phaeton; and then, mounting his own horse, he cantered along gayly at their side.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ÆNEAS MAKES A DECLARATION.

One of the few beings for whom Bruen Harfleur manifested affection was the old free negro Chloe, whom he claimed as his mammy. Though never officially installed as his nurse, she had voluntarily undertaken that office during his neglected childhood, and her humble solicitude had supplied many omissions of the woman Judith, to whose tender mercies he was committed by his father. Old Chloe had been much attached to Nettie Bruen and the child of her first unhappy union, and, when these objects of her humble affection were removed, had attached herself like a faithful dog to the poor cripple whom no one else seemed to care for. Through all weathers she would make her daily pilgrimage to the White House, to see how her baby, as she called him, was doing, until he grew old enough to visit her instead.

The old woman was sitting by the fire when Ruth arrived with her companions, presiding over the preparations for her dinner, which were conducted by a little negro girl that Mrs. Bruen sent to wait on her when she was sick. She turned her head as the door opened, revealing a face that might have served as a model for the Cumæan Sibyl.

"Hi! yi!" she exclaimed, with a brightening countenance, when she perceived who the visitors were, "here comes my chillun for bring dey ole mammy some victuals: gentlefolks' victuals been good, but tain't no carnal food ole Chloe need now," and she shook her head with doleful solemnity.

"But we've brought you some medicine, too, Aunt Chloe, and that will do you good," said Ruth, in a cheering voice.

On opening her basket, however, she found that a bottle containing some of Mrs. Bruen's cordial had been forgotten, and left behind at the church, where she had removed some of the contents to get at Bruen's pencil-case, that had been put in the basket. Audley offered to go back and fetch it; and, as Bruen made no demur, Ruth readily agreed to await his return and prescribe for the old woman.

"How did you catch this cold, Aunt Chloe?" she asked, when Audley had gone, well knowing the delight that old women take in giving the history of their ailments.'

"Well, it been nigh on to a month now, chile," answered the old woman. "I'se been feelin' poorly ever since the day o' that 'ere torment."

"Torment?" repeated Ruth, mystified.

"Yes; dem torment whar Miss Claude been crown queen. I'se walk to de high road for see de gentlefolks pass by, an' I git sick. Ole Chloe ain't young now like her used to was, and can't go a gaddin' no more in dis warl. Ole Chloe neber see right done; but de right 'ill come for all dat; yes, yes, him 'ill come, but ole Chloe neber live for see 'em."

Ruth thought the old woman was wandering in her mind, and paid no attention to her vagaries.

"You won't talk so despondingly, Aunt Chloe," she said, "when you have taken some of Mrs. Bruen's cordial and see how much good it will do you. She got the recipe from a famous doctor, and it never fails to cure, she says."

"Mrs. Bruen one good 'oman to think o' a poor ole nigger," Chloe answered, gratefully. "I ain't have no doctor's stuff since I been ailin'. I'se been tryin' for save a little somethin' for buy some, but it always take everything I make for pay Misser Tadpole what I owes him."

"Mr. Tadpole!" cried Ruth. "How on earth came you to owe him anything, Aunt Chloe?"

"Why, you see, chile," began the old woman, "I does his washin' for him, at ten cents a dozen, but he make de 'greement wid me, afore I begin, dat for every garment what lackin' de dozen he gwine take a cent outen my pay, and he don't never have more'n two garments a week, so dat take all my pay, you see, and sometimes he don't hab nothin' 'tall in de wash, and dat make me owe him. Alick Chance, which he been to school, he say tain't right by his 'rithmetic; but he can't pint out whar the orrer lay, and Misser Tadpole he keep all de count of it, and he say his count right, and I owe him something every month. I can't see how it is, an' it don't seem right dat I pay him for doin' of his work; but Misser Tadpole he got larnin', and de book larnin' all go agin me."

"If I were you, Aunt Chloe," said Ruth, who saw that it would be useless to try to explain the false logic of this contemptible trickery to the old negro's simple brain, "I would not do Mr. Tadpole's washing for him any longer."

"Dat what I want, chile, ef I could once git out o' his debt," said Aunt Chloe; "but you see I has to keep on washin' for him till I pay, and it look like de more I works de more I owes. You see he never

have more'n two pieces in de wash a week, so dere don't never come no pay to me: here his week's wash I fetched from the school-house dis mornin'." And before Ruth had time to object, the old woman drew from her pocket a dirty handkerchief and a pair of socks. Abashed at having been betrayed into this involuntary inspection of Mr. Tadpole's wardrobe, and not caring to pursue the investigation further, Ruth slipped out of the cabin, under pretext of going to watch for Malvern, and walked slowly down the road, venting her disgust and indignation against Æneas by stamping underfoot as she went along the unoffending pine-cones that lay scattered in her path. She had not proceeded many steps when she unexpectedly encountered the object of her supreme loathing and contempt wending his way towards the cabin she had just quitted. She was about to pass him with a scarcely perceptible inclination of the head, but Æneas did not allow her the option.

"Since Providence has thrown you in my way, Miss Ruthie," he began, recovering from his momentary surprise at meeting her, "I will take the liberty, if you entertain no objection, to join you in your *promenarde*, and impart something that has long been on my mind."

Ruth did entertain very decided objections, but not knowing any polite way of expressing them, continued her walk in silence, taking care, however, to turn her steps towards the cabin, so as to insure its being as short as possible.

"Ahem,—did you, a—receive the little, ahem,—the note I sent you day before yesterday?" resumed Æneas.

"I did," replied Ruth, curtly.

"You, ahem, remember that I a—observed in it that I wished, ahem, to speak with you alone, because I had, a—hem, something very particular to say to you?"

"I remember," answered Ruth; "and I think, Mr. Tadpole," looking him full in the face, "that you had better not say it."

Æneas dropped his pious eyes, put his hand to his mouth, coughed a low, embarrassed cough behind it, and began again,—

"Miss Ruthie, Providence has placed it in my power to render you a very essential and important service."

Ruth regarded him in silence, with an air of haughty contempt.

"Circumstances, which it is needless now to explain," continued Æneas, not observing the look, "have made me acquainted with many particulars of your past history, and that of your family, which it would be greatly to your profit and advantage to know."

Ruth's breath began to come and go quickly. She had long felt that she was separated from her family by some secret influence which she could not understand,—that she stood apart, a stranger among her own kindred, living in her home, but not of it. Not only did Mr. Harfleur's peculiar treatment fix this impression on her mind, but there was an indescribable something in the manner of all her acquaintance that seemed to deepen this sense of isolation. There was no positive unkindness, except from Mr. Harfleur himself, no studied neglect; on the contrary, people seemed disposed to treat her with peculiar gentleness, as though she were a cripple, or an invalid, or had some such not very flattering claim upon the good nature of society; yet, she was tacitly passed over and set aside in all family arrangements, the very servants seeming to govern their actions with reference to Claude alone, as though she were the only daughter of the house. Sometimes Ruth tried to account for this by her long absence, during which everybody had fallen into the habit of taking no account of her; but that unnatural banishment itself was one of the things that perplexed her most. Then there was that mysterious encounter in the church-yard, and the occurrences on the day of the tournament, that made her feel a kind of terror of herself, as the centre of a mystery she could not unravel.

No wonder, then, that Mr. Tadpole's words excited something more than curiosity within her, and she fixed her eyes upon him with a look of deeper interest than she would have believed it possible for anything that he could say to inspire. The pious Æneas observing her agitation, and conscious of having obtained a hearing, which he was by no means certain of under ordinary circumstances, judged the moment propitious, and resolved to take advantage of it for bringing out the something particular he had in reserve; so striking his most seductive attitude, and making a weak-eyed effort to look her straight in the face, he faltered out,—

"Miss Ruthie, your—ahem, ahem—your a—image has long been impressed in letters—ahem—in colors—a—ahem—characters of flame upon my heart." He had his speech all fixed beforehand, but

in the embarrassment of the moment it escaped him, and he bungled fearfully.

Angry and disappointed, Ruth drew back haughtily, and regarded him with a look of supreme contempt.

"Mr. Tadpole," she said, indignantly, "if this is all you have to say, I may as well inform you that the knowledge of it is neither profitable nor pleasant to me."

"This is not all, Miss Ruthie; it is far from all," he answered, in a pleading tone. "I assure you, upon my word as a minister of the gospel, that I can, by revealing what I know, raise you to the highest pinnacle of worldly grandeur and prosperity; and if you will condescend to bestow upon me your heart and hand——"

"The only thing I shall ever bestow upon you," cried Ruth, angrily snatching away the hand he had made an effort to seize, "is my utmost contempt and detestation."

"It does not become a minister of the gospel," sighed the pious Æneas, "to resent bitter words, especially from a lady, and if you will reconsider yours, Miss Ruth, and think of the great service it is in my power to render you——"

"The only service you can render me, Mr. Tadpole," cried Ruth, haughtily, "is never to come into my presence again. The greatest of earthly blessings, if received at your hands, would be to me but a curse and a humiliation."

"A curse and a humiliation let it be, then!" exclaimed Æneas, goaded for once into an honest outburst of indignation, that made him appear, for the moment, almost respectable. "You have scorned me like a worm of the dust, but the time is coming when I will turn the knowledge that might have made you the first lady in the land into a humiliation and a curse, and you shall yourself be scorned by the one whose scorn it will be hardest for you to bear."

He turned away, with a look of snaky malice gleaming in the little, pale-blue eyes, and left Ruth standing alone outside Aunt Chloe's cabin-door, bewildered and alarmed at the words she had just heard. She was so stunned by Mr. Tadpole's unexpected outburst that even the clatter of Audley's horse's hoofs, as he came galloping down the lane, failed to rouse her, and she still stood, staring with a look of haughty indignation at Æneas's retreating figure, when Audley, springing lightly to the ground, presented himself before her.

"Somebody looks as if there had been a quarrel on hand," he said, with a laugh, as he glanced from her glowing features towards the clump of pines, behind which Æneas that moment disappeared.

"Yes," cried Ruth, with an angry wave of her hand towards the innocent pines, "that impertinent wretch has dared——" Then, ashamed of having suffered her passion to lead her so near the betrayal of a confidence that all honorable women hold sacred, even for the meanest of their wooers, she suddenly paused and dropped her eyes. Audley comprehended the gesture, and felt as if the face before him would have justified almost any daring, so wondrously beautiful did it appear at that moment, the large, dark eyes flashing with excitement, and the cheeks glowing with brilliant color.

"Don't be too hard on the poor fellow," he said, with a significant smile; "there are other impertinent wretches who would like to dare the same thing, if they thought it would be of any use; —but here is your vial; go leave your prescription with our patient, and let's be off. It must be nearly dinner-time, and I am most unromantically hungry."

CHAPTER XXX.

AUDLEY COMES VERY NEAR MAKING A FOOL OF HIMSELF.

JULIA MALVERN was surprised when she saw her brother return to Sandowne with Ruth Harfleur. He had left her under the impression that he was going to dine at the White House, and she wondered what could have induced him to change his mind. The dim possibility of his having met with a refusal presented itself, for a moment, to her imagination, but only to be laughed away. No, no; it was impossible that any woman should refuse him,—the idea was simply preposterous. Claude was not at home, or Audley was fooling and dawdling in his usual fashion,—very provoking it must be confessed; but then Audley was sure to win whenever he chose to advance his suit, so what was the use of fretting?

Mrs. Malvern did not take so solacing a view of the case.

"My dear," she said, turning with a

frown from the window where she stood, as Audley sprang from his horse, and commenced assisting Ruth to alight, "you remember the anxiety I was expressing about Audley the other day; and there is that designing girl gone and put herself in his way again."

Julia had her own reasons for not liking Ruth Harfleur, but she was of too noble a nature to be willfully unjust to another,—even though a woman, and a beauty, and a rival.

"I do not think Miss Harfleur is a designing person, mamma," she said, quietly.

"Not more than others in her situation, my dear," replied Mrs. Malvern; "but these portionless beauties are always designing creatures."

"Only where there is a golden prize in the market like General Bagpipe," said Julia, coloring deeply; "but Audley's fortunes would hardly tempt the most needy to waste her diplomacy on him now."

"You are very unreasonable, Julia," returned her mother, stiffly, "to make a personal application of my remark. This girl is not only without fortune, but has not even a name; your case is entirely different: you have birth, rank, distinction, and all the advantages of an exalted station in life."

"And the disadvantages, too," murmured Julia, with a sigh.

"And have a right to expect," continued her mother, "that he upon whom you bestow all these will have something to offer in return; and General Bagpipe, with all his money, may well congratulate himself upon his good fortune in marrying a Malvern,—a descendant of the Audleys, too;—and as for your brother, there is not an heiress in the land but might thank her stars if she could get him."

"That may be so," replied Julia, "but no portionless beauty could indulge herself in the expensive luxury of a husband like Audley; and therefore, if Miss Harfleur is really the designing creature you take her for, she is not likely to waste her powers on him. Major Dalton is much more tempting game to one in her situation; and, indeed, I have heard that his attentions to her are very marked."

Julia turned her head as she spoke, so that her mother could not see her face: if Mrs. Malvern had noted her daughter's pallid, glassy look at that moment her next words would have died away on her tongue.

"I hope to heaven it is so!" she said, fervently; "but really, I have never seen him pay her any attention."

"That is merely because you do not see him at all; he never comes where we are."

"But if he were so very attentive we could not help seeing him now and then, spending most of our time as we do at the White House. He certainly cannot be thrown with her half so much as your brother; indeed, Julia, I think Audley is entirely too attentive to her, and he certainly does admire her music most extravagantly."

"Oh, that is only Audley's way, mamma," said Julia. "You know he always was extravagantly fond of music, and is forever paying women attentions that mean nothing. Indeed, I may as well tell you at once, if it will set your mind at rest, he assured me only yesterday that he had fully made up his mind to marry Claude."

Mrs. Malvern's face grew radiant.

"He could not possibly have made a more suitable choice," she said. "Even setting aside pecuniary considerations, which you know, Julia, though people in our situation cannot afford to disregard them entirely, I have always acknowledged to be subordinate to the higher claims of birth and family, she is in every way a highly suitable connection for the Malverns. The Harfleurs, I am told, are a fine old creole family, descended from some of the best blood in France, while on the mother's side she is connected with the very first families in Virginia; indeed, her great-great-grandfather, Calvert Bruen, was descended from the same stock that gave rise to the Audleys, and was connected by marriage with my own grandfather's sister-in-law. Really, nothing more fortunate could have happened. I must write to Maria about it this very day."

Audley and Ruth entered the room just at that moment, and Mrs. Malvern was so beaming with satisfaction at the information just imparted by Julia, that she received the designing creature with effusive politeness, and did not seem to think it necessary to stand guard over Audley, as usual, to counteract the nefarious designs of a portionless beauty.

After dinner, while the rest of the family were gathered round the sitting-room fire, Ruth stepped into the parlor to look for some music she had left there on a previous visit, which she desired to carry back home with her. She had searched through a great heap of loose

sheets, when her eye happened to rest on the frontispiece of an old score of "Somnambula," representing a certain famous prima-donna as she appeared in the celebrated sleep-walking scene at the old mill. The rude wood-cut reminded her of the exquisite pleasure with which she had heard that, her first opera, in the Crescent City, years ago, and she sat brooding over it, her mind filled with a thousand foolish, pleasing fancies, till her reverie was broken by a shadow falling across the page, and, raising her eyes, she beheld Malvern standing in the open window.

"What are you musing over so intently?" he said, with a smile, reaching out his hand to take the music.

"Nothing,—only thinking of the first time I ever went to the opera, and wishing that that was I," said Ruth, pointing to the picture, as she resigned the music to his hand.

"And I, on the contrary, am very glad it is not you," said Audley, as he gravely contemplated the beautiful features of the too celebrated songstress. "Your innocence and purity are worth a great deal more than *la Diva's* fame."

"But one need not adopt her character in acquiring her fame," replied Ruth, sharply. "A musician is not necessarily a—a——" She felt that her impetuosity had got her into a difficulty, and stopped short.

"No, not necessarily," said Audley, quietly assuming what she had stumbled at expressing; "but I do not think any woman can accustom herself to the ordeal of being set up as a target for public criticism without losing much of that shrinking sensitive modesty which characterizes the best part of the sex. A woman who does not mind being stared at has lost all her charms for me."

"But you forget," said Ruth, "that an actress never appears before an audience in her own person. Mrs. Siddons was never Sarah Siddons on the stage; and the more admirable she was, the less of self she felt in herself. A modest woman can face the stare of thousands on the stage, though she might shrink from the casual glance of a single passer in the streets. It is as absurd and unreasonable to talk about an actress or a musician getting up on the stage to be stared at, as to say of a couple waltzing that they are standing up on the floor to embrace each other."

"Pardon me, Miss Harfleur," replied Audley, "if I seem too severe in my strictures on a profession which is so fortunate as to have you for its advocate; but even at the risk of being condemned as absurd and unreasonable, I must still cling to my opinion that the stage is no place for such as you. I have seen too much of green-rooms, and, though the admission does me little credit, am too familiar with what goes on behind the scenes, not to feel assured that whatever you may believe now, in the innocence and purity of your heart, a few weeks' actual experience of the associations to which a professional actress is condemned would cause you to reverse your judgment, and shrink from the boards as heartily as you now long for them."

"And what," she exclaimed, rising and approaching the window at which he stood, "has reduced the morality of the profession to this low ebb but the unjust and narrow prejudice that banishes character and respectability from the stage, and abandons it to the profligate and unprincipled? Or how can you expect it to be considered reputable when respectable young men and women are brought up in the belief that dramatic talents are but snares and devices of Satan, rather than the divine inspirations that they are? I am tired of all this sickening cant. Why do you extol Shakspeare, and Goethe, and Molière, and Racine to the skies, yet condemn the art that gives living embodiment to their divine creations? How can you love Wagner, Bellini, Donizetti, and yet condemn the lyric stage?"

She stood patting her foot nervously on the floor as she ceased speaking, and Audley thought, as he watched her, her cheeks glowing and her bosom heaving with excitement, that he had never in all his life beheld anything so lovely.

"You stand to your colors bravely," he said, with an admiring smile; "and should I ever be so unfortunate as to fall under a ban, I hope I may find as persevering and zealous an advocate. But why should we stand here disputing all day about a subject on which we are never likely to agree, when there is one argument that you know never fails to silence me?"

He tossed away the extinguished cigar he had been unconsciously holding in his hand while they were talking, and, entering the room, went and opened the piano. Among the loose music that lay scattered there his eye rested upon the air from "Maritana," the first song he had ever heard her sing.

"Ah, here is an old friend," he said, placing the sheets on the music-board. "You have not sung this for me since we

first met, long, long ago, and it's a favorite of mine, too; I hope you have not forgotten?"

Ruth had not forgotten, and somehow the memory of the foolish words he had spoken then, when she was but a child, came rushing to her mind, and brought the color to her cheeks so violently that, instead of answering him, she turned away and walked to the window to hide her embarrassment. She wondered if he remembered, too, and if the foolish promise made so long ago still lingered in his mind as it did in hers. There was something in his manner that made her suspect it did, as, drawing near to where she stood, he whispered, in a pleading tone,—

"Won't you sing me this one song, Miss Harfleur, for the sake of the 'long ago'?"

"No; not to-day," she answered, without looking at him. "I don't feel like singing this afternoon."

"But just this one song. I ask it as a special favor."

"No,—I can't."

It was the first time she had ever appeared disobliging about her music.

"You have refused every request I have made of you to-day," said Audley, drawing away from her, and speaking in a reproachful tone; "that is, every one you found I had greatly set my heart on."

Ruth toyed nervously with the music she held in her hand, and answered nothing. It happened that they were the same sheets between which she had thrust Bruen's sketch, and, as the leaves fluttered between her fingers, the little bit of card-board containing her portrait flew out and fell on the floor at Audley's feet.

"Chance is more generous to me than you," he said, stooping to pick up the picture. "I think you will have to let me keep this now, just to show that you are not inexorably bent upon refusing every prayer of mine. What! still deny me? Then, by heaven, I'll never ask any favor of you again as long as I live!"

At these words, spoken with strange earnestness, Ruth drew back the hand she had extended to take the picture from him, and raised her eyes to Audley's face. It was but an instant that their eyes met, yet in that glance Audley read all that he wished to know, and far more than Ruth would have cared to reveal. He bent over her and seized her hand; his arm was round her waist; his lips were close to hers,—when there was a light footstep heard in the hall, and Ruth, breaking away from him, rushed headlong out of the room. The next moment Audley's mother stood before him.

"Dear me, Audley," she began. "what can be the matter? I met Miss Harfleur in the hall just now in such agitation that she couldn't even speak to me, and here you are with your face as red as a beet! I hope, my son, you have not been so foolish as——"

"Oh, I'm too old to do foolish things now, mother," he answered, interrupting her, and thrusting the picture hastily into his pocket. "You want me to mail that?" taking a letter from her hand. "All right. I'm going to South Ambury this evening, to see Major Maelstrom on business, and, by the way, it's high time I was getting off. I may not be back for a day or two, so good-night; and here's for Julia, too," he added, imprinting a second kiss on her lips, and, without giving her time for another word, he hurried from the room.

"The deuce take it!" he muttered to himself as he mounted his horse. "If the old lady hadn't come in just in the nick of time, that girl's sweet face would have played the very devil with me. By Jove, I must fix things up with Claude at once,—yes, I certainly must, and not run the risk of making a fool of myself over this girl any longer."

CHAPTER XXXI.

RUTH'S PLOT, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

AUDLEY MALVERN did not return from that visit to South Ambury for several weeks. Couriers had arrived from the disaffected counties with news of fresh disasters to the Government forces. A new leader had suddenly risen among the outlaws; a man of strange daring and no common military skill, who had organized from the loose vagabonds hiding in the swamps an effective force of several hundred men, with which he bid defiance to the feeble detachments sent by Government to put down deserters. The necessity for more stringent measures having now become apparent, Major Maelstrom was ordered to proceed in person to the scene of action with such forces as he

could muster by drawing raw recruits from the Camp of Instruction and convalescent patients from the hospitals. Audley was appointed to drill and organize this forlorn hope; and having now entirely recovered from his accident determined to accompany the major's expedition, Colonel Canning, the officer to whom he was originally accredited, having been captured and hanged by the outlaws and his bungling, undisciplined troop utterly annihilated,—such of them at least as had not gone over to the enemy.

During the hurried preparations for departure Audley had not visited the White House at all, though he still clung to his resolution concerning Claude. No suitable occasion had offered, however, for paying his addresses, and, as he did not exert himself to make one, time slipped away until the very last day before his departure arrived, and still his fate was undecided. "There is no use being in a hurry," he said to himself from day to day, and so his time for action came to be very short indeed.

But, if short, it promised also to be propitious. That day happened to be Claude's birthday, and there was to be a great ball at the White House in honor of it. Young ladies of nineteen don't mind birthdays. All the *élite* of the neighborhood, both of the native and refugee society, were invited. The Norgoods mustered all their forces for the occasion, and even pretty Mary Dalton, at her mother's instigation, was induced to lay aside her widow's cap and take the field openly a second time. Ruth had seen George, too, and persuaded him to be present. She was too genuine a woman not to take a deep interest in the love-affairs of other people, and she hoped that by bringing George and Julia together again she might be paving the way to a reconciliation, little knowing with what wild, passionate natures she had to deal. She loved George as a brother, and was sorely distressed at the dissolute courses to which he had abandoned himself. She would have given worlds to reclaim him, but she felt that the glory of such a work could belong only to one whom George loved as he had never loved her. She felt that his wayward nature could be led only by the force of some over-mastering passion, such as Julia Malvern alone was capable of inspiring. She knew the depth of his feeling for her, and the more she studied Julia's character the more she felt that Julia alone might reclaim him, if, alas, he were not already beyond the redeeming power of any human influence. At any rate she did not think him beyond the hope of trying, and she could not see why the same passion that had wrought his ruin might not be used for his salvation, if the only hand that had power to tune again the jarring cords of his heart would mend its broken strings and tune its harsh discords to melody once more. As for George, she knew that what he took for the bitterness of hatred in his heart was but the sharper bitterness of love; nor could she believe it possible that a woman who had once loved George could ever become indifferent to him, especially one like Julia, so capable of appreciating his noble nature, one to whose lofty soul the common herd of men must seem so tame and flat in comparison.

Love, then, taken for granted on both sides, Ruth thought she had only to bring the two in contact when, like electric wires, they would rush together by a common impulse, never dreaming that the overcharged currents might meet with a crash that would shiver to atoms the vessels that held them. So Ruth directed all her endeavors towards bringing George and Julia together without letting them suspect her design; and, having used her influence over her friend to the utmost, she succeeded in wringing from him a promise which he would have made to no other living creature,—namely, that he would be present at a ball where he knew Julia Malvern was to be a guest.

Of the many whose hopes and fears were centred on what that evening might bring forth, there was no one that looked forward to it with such trepidation as Audley Malvern. It was his last chance of seeing Claude, and he had fully made up his mind to address her in form, and settle his fate forever. He had no doubt about finding a convenient occasion, for she never failed to give him preference over all rivals, and he could always obtain a hearing, while others waited in vain for a smile or a glance. Still less did he doubt what the result of the interview would be; yet he felt nervous and uncomfortable, and would fain have put it off a little longer.

"It must be because I have been a bachelor so long," he said, reasoning with himself as he sat pulling on his boots. "When a fellow has lived free and easy till he's thirty-three, it's no light matter to subject himself to the dominion of a woman; but it's what we all must come to in the end, so I suppose I might just as

well make up my mind to it at once. Confound that other sister!—I wish I had never seen her." Then he worked himself into a passion, and flung a boot-jack at Archie's head, because there was a button missing somewhere, and when Archie absconded, having no more innocent heads to vent his spleen upon, he went fidgeting absently about the room, and returned to his soliloquy:

"The reason I didn't mind making love to the other sister must have been because I knew nothing could come of it. It's natural that a fellow should feel solemn when he's going to commit himself for life. If I were going to marry Ruth,—but I knew from the first that she was out of the question, yes, altogether out of the question." An unconscious sigh escaped with the words, and as he pronounced them a sudden pang shot through his heart, that made him anxious to fly from his own thoughts. He finished his toilette hurriedly, and set off for the White House, to fortify himself before taking the decisive step by a talk with Julia.

She was already dressed when he arrived, and descended immediately to the drawing-room. The guests had not yet begun to assemble, and as the ladies of the family were still busy pinning on their last loops and bows, the brother and sister had the few minutes before the first ring at the door-bell to themselves.

Audley was struck with surprise, as his sister entered, at the extreme plainness of her dress. She wore a white silk, of very elegant material but somewhat the worse for wear, unadorned by a single jewel or a scrap of lace. It was the first time Audley had seen her dressed for a ball since the change in their fortune had deprived her of the means of gratifying that taste for pomp and splendor which she was so fond of indulging, and he could not reconcile himself to the contrast. He had always been accustomed to see her ablaze with silks and jewels, that set off her queenly person, and gave her an appearance almost regal. She was a magnificent style of woman, and required magnificent surroundings to set her off. Simplicity did not become her, and she appeared to such disadvantage in the unwonted plainness of her attire that her brother could not help exclaiming,—

"Why, good gracious, Julia, what is the matter with your dress? You haven't taken to the 'sweet simplicity' affectation, I hope. It don't become you a bit, besides being entirely out of fashion."

"It is not 'sweet simplicity,' Audley, but 'stern necessity' that regulates my toilette to-night," said Julia. "You forget that I have no longer the means to dress as I would like."

"But haven't you some scraps of your old finery left that you could fix yourself up with a little? They say that all the women have to brush up their old things now, and I think some lace or ribbon, tied up in bows, you know, and dabbed about over your clothes like other women do, would improve you."

"My laces were all burnt or stolen at Heathmoor," replied Julia. "There was not a shred left as big as my hand. That fire at Heathmoor," she continued, with an effort at gayety, "is as great a blessing to me as was the fire at Ravenswood to Caleb Balderstone; it furnishes an excuse for everything."

"But your diamonds; you saved them. Where are they?"

"Eaten up or worn out long ago. Converted into vulgar lard and bacon, or plain yarns, and made to serve the ignoble purposes of keeping off hunger and cold. We dined on the last gem the day before we left Carolina, and were preparing to devour mamma's watch next. You see we were very luxurious. Cleopatra's pearl was nothing to the jewels and trinkets we have been devouring for the last four years."

Audley turned away and bit his lip. Julia saw that he was disturbed, and tried to inspire him with her own levity.

"I didn't mind eating up the diamonds, you know," she continued, "because I mean to have much handsomer ones when I am married. Your brother-in-law elect has a superb set that he has presented to each of his three wives in turn, and as I come next in the order of succession, and don't intend to die in time to give him an opportunity of transferring the gift, I can shine in the handsomest jewels in America when I'm a dashing young widow."

"Umph! if old Bags would have the grace to peg out soon," said Audley, "it might not be such a bad investment, after all."

"No, indeed; but I never was one of your lucky people," said Julia, flippantly, "and it would be like my stars if he should hang on for twenty years yet just to spite me. I always thought it must be a charming thing to be a rich young widow. One has all the freedom of a

girl with the independence of a matron, and is not domineered over by the proprieties. Ah! but what a pity it is that one has to be a wife first! I wish I had been born a widow."

"Julia, Julia, you shocking creature!" cried her brother, laughing in spite of himself. "What will you say next? To hear you talk one would think you had been born without a heart."

"And yet I have as much as other women," said Julia. "The only difference is that I dare to look at myself as I am, and make no effort to whitewash my motives in marrying a disgusting old brute for his money. Other women marry for money or for convenience every day, and so varnish the thing over that they never think the worse of themselves for it. I, at least, am not a hypocrite, but confess myself the base, sordid, mercenary creature that I am."

"Yes, you are a hypocrite, Julia, but you turn your mantle of hypocrisy inside out," said her brother, patting her tenderly on the cheek. "You make yourself out a great deal worse than you are."

"That would be hard to do now," said Julia, sadly. "I wasn't born good like Ruth Harfleur and that sort of people, you know, who grow the better for having trouble, but I have been growing worse and worse ever since our troubles began, until now I am a perfect monster, and heaven only knows where I shall end. Marrying for money never makes people better, but it leaves us so poor in our own estimation, so mean in spirit, so hollow, so empty, and, after all, so unsatisfied, that sometimes I almost doubt whether it pays. And yet I cannot creep through the world a poor Cinderella all my days."

She swept proudly across the room, paused before a tall mirror, and took a contemptuous survey of herself. Audley felt chilled and disheartened by her words. He had come to borrow encouragement from Julia for his own matrimonial projects; but, somehow, he rather shrank from alluding to the subject now, and concluded there was no use in saying anything more to her till the matter was settled. His mind was fully made up anyhow, and why should Julia's words make him waver? He was not going to marry for money. Claude was a woman that any man might be glad to get without a stiver; and, besides, he was very decently in love with her, or, at all events, he did not love anybody else—no.

Just then his heart gave a great bound in his breast, and sent the hot blood throbbing through every vein. He heard a light step on the stair, a rustling of airy drapery at the door, and the next instant Ruth glided into the room with her arms full of flowers. She started back in surprise on beholding Malvern, and a deep flush overspread her features, for it was the first time they had met since the day she fled from him so abruptly in the drawing-room at Sandowne. He, however, after that first involuntary recognition of a power he was resolved not to own, betrayed no sign of emotion, and advanced to meet her with that air of frank cordiality so natural to him.

"I hope, Miss Harfleur," he said, extending his palm, "that your hands are not too full to spare one to greet a friend."

She rested her rosy fingers a moment in his own, without raising her eyes, dropped half her flowers in doing it, and, as she stooped to pick them up, lost a little spray of pansies from her hair. Audley replaced the other flowers in her hands, but stuck the pansies in his buttonhole, unforbidden, it may have been unperceived, while Ruth hurried on to Julia with her lapful of roses.

"You refused to wear any of Claude's jewels, Miss Malvern," she said, tumbling her flowers on a chair, "so I have brought you some of mine, and you need not accuse yourself of sailing under false colors, as you express it, with them; for, though more brilliant than Claude's diamonds, they are modest enough for any of us: indeed, flowers are the only cheap finery I know that isn't vulgar."

With that she placed on Julia's head a diadem of white camellias, that made the most becoming *coiffure* she had ever worn; then, by pinning a knot of rose-buds here, and a cluster of green leaves there, catching back the too cumbrous train with tasty bouquets, holding a loop on this side and a plait on that side with sprays of flowers, she metamorphosed Julia's incomplete *toilette* into a stylish and elegant costume. Audley was delighted; Julia, unused to such expedients, could hardly believe her eyes, and both of them remarked then, for the first time, that Ruth, though her dress was very striking and artistic, had not a single jewel about her: it was simple white *tulle*, trimmed with pansies.

"I declare you are as good as a fairy godmother, Ruth," said Julia, as she surveyed herself with open satisfaction.

"You have really made me look quite stylish,—in this old tagged-out thing, too, that I never imagined could be made to look respectable again."

It was the first time she had ever dropped the formality of "Miss" in her intercourse with Ruth; though with her sister it had been "dear Claude" and "dear Julia" from the first. Ruth noticed the friendly advance, and it gratified her, coming from Colonel Malvern's sister; but she was hardly prepared for Julia's next movement, which was to catch Ruth's face in both her hands and kiss it.

"I wish I was half as good and unselfish as you are," she said, her haughty features relaxing into an expression of wonderful sweetness. "I have been rude and spiteful to you ever since we first met, and here you are doing your best to make me look pretty,—and you a beauty yourself, too."

Never had Julia appeared more attractive than she did at that moment. "If George could only see her now!" thought Ruth, and before the wish had well shaped itself in her brain George Dalton entered the room. Julia started like one awaking from a dream, and caught at the chair in front of her for support; but she was too practiced a woman of the world to be long mastered by her own emotions, and, before George could perceive her agitation, had recovered herself, and seemed wholly occupied in arranging her bouquet,—so occupied that she appeared not even to be aware of his presence. He spoke first to Ruth, who had gone forward to meet him.

"You see I have kept my promise," he whispered, taking her hand and drawing it through his arm.

"And that other promise, George; you have not forgotten——"

"To come here sober? No; I am as sane as the sons of Rechab—at least I was, until I saw—but no matter."

"So you two are on such terms as those, are you?" thought Julia, as she watched them talking together so confidentially, and the kiss she had just bestowed upon Ruth burned on her lips like a blow. "No wonder you were so unselfish towards me just now; it shows how little you fear me: how little I am to him, you insolent conqueror!"

She raised her eyes, unconscious that the roses she had been nervously tearing to pieces had pricked her with their thorns till the blood reddened her fingertips. George met her eyes with a look as cold and disdainful as her own.

"Permit me to express my pleasure at meeting you again, Miss Malvern," he said, with a distant bow.

"Your pleasure is equaled only by my own, Major Dalton," she replied, with a very slight inclination of the head, and turned away as if much more concerned in noting the next arrival than in continuing the interview with her old lover. George looked after her a moment, and Ruth thought she felt his arm tremble a little under her hand; but he said nothing, nor did he refer to Julia again by word or look during the entire evening.

Arrivals now followed one another in quick succession, and by ten o'clock Mr. Harfleur's rooms were crowded with a brilliant assemblage. Everything seemed propitious to the occasion: the weather was superb, and a glorious moonlight, such moonlight as is only seen in those soft Southern regions, silvered every leaf and twig, and almost paled the great bonfires that were blazing at intervals down the long avenue. Lights glanced in every window of the mansion, and colored lanterns suspended from the trees made the garden like a scene in fairy-land. The whole house was decorated with flowers, and in the centre of the hall there stood a splendid floral pyramid, six feet high, crowned with a blazing finial of crimson euphorbias. A fine military band, stationed in the piazza, made the gravest feet tingle and pat time unconsciously to its music. In short, there never had been such a carnival in all that region since the forest rang with the din of the Indian war-dance, and the young people, for full two seasons after, dated from Claude Harfleur's ball as the great era in their social calendar.

Amid all that festive throng there was none so recklessly gay as Julia Malvern. She was the star of the evening, the dazzling noonday sun rather, before whose shining splendor the brightest stars grew pale. Even Claude was for once completely eclipsed, and people could talk of nothing but that superb Miss Malvern. Julia seemed inspired that night with a relentless determination to fascinate, and gathering all her wonderful powers she fairly walked over hearts. Stifling the vein of satire that too often gave a sting to her words, her sallies still sparkled with wit and gay repartee, brilliant, though harmless, like bubbles that burst in the air. You would never have taken her for the same Julia whose bitter utterances had so damped her brother's spirit an hour ago. So brilliant, so royal, so

superb that men looked up to her as to a queen, yet so affable, so winning, so gracious, that the most timid felt emboldened by her smile. Every one felt himself distinguished by her notice, yet there was none too insignificant for her to be gracious to. Even the ladies, those charming Philistines that show such a morbid horror of each other's society at balls, came in for a share of her complaisance, and praised her behind her back; while the mothers of marriageable daughters forgot to make reflections about her age until next day. The men were all frantic about her; she was surrounded by a phalanx of admirers too deep for her to see over, and had invitations to dance faster than she could answer them. Yet, with her wonderful tact, she contrived to let no one feel that he was slighted; her very refusals were softened with an air of gracious regret that made them pass for delicate compliments. The only person in all that assembly whom she seemed not to think it worth her while to notice was George Dalton. She did not bestow so much as a glance upon him after their first formal meeting.

If social triumphs can make a woman happy, then ought Julia's cup to have been full to overflowing. But, though her success, to all outward seeming, was so complete, never had Julia felt less satisfaction with herself and with the world than at that moment. Little did the thoughtless revelers around her dream that the light of those flashing eyes was but the reflection of a soul scorched with self-made torments, or that the glow on her cheeks was painted with blood from a heart torn by passions more cruel than the vultures of Prometheus. Who, amid all that delighted, admiring, envying throng, could guess that a single glance of the only eyes that never looked towards her would have been more to Julia Malvern than the adulation of all the world beside? Talk about stoicism, there is no stoic like a fashionable woman who can smile and wheedle and fascinate, even while the iron is passing through her soul. Julia was an admirable stoic; but even she grew weary of her mask at last, and felt that she must lay it aside for a little while or it would stifle her.

Towards the close of the evening, during that lull in the dance that always takes place just after supper, she contrived to steal off alone, and found her way to a little dilapidated summer-house, where there was a rustic-bench hidden under a canopy of purple cobæa and jessamine-vines. She entered, all her disguises thrown aside now, looking a very ghost of the magnificent Julia who had been dazzling the ball-room a moment before, and was about to fling herself down dejectedly on the bench, when a dark figure rose from the other end, and a voice asked,—

"Is that you, Ruth?"

She started, and stood haughty and erect as an offended queen. It was George Dalton's voice, and he had called Ruth by her name. Evidently he had come here to meet her; there had been an appointment, a private understanding; these two were to steal off and meet each other alone. It was enough: she saw it all clearly now, and her own doom was doubly sealed.

"I beg your pardon," she said, coldly, turning towards the door. "I had no idea that I was going to intrude upon a lovers' rendezvous, or I would not have come here."

"You need not disturb yourself, Miss Malvern," he replied; "the only rendezvous I have is with thoughts too hateful to be rendered worse even by your presence, since they are all about you."

"Then I beg that you will not allow me to intrude even upon your thoughts," returned Julia. "I assure you *I* have no wish to do so," she added, with cutting emphasis.

"No more have I that you should," George retorted; "but to me there is no choice. In depriving me of every noble aspiration, every lofty theme of reflection, in blasting and cursing my whole life with your poisonous influence, you have dragged down my very thoughts, till they can find nothing better to feed upon than you."

Just then the moon came out from behind a passing cloud, and, shining full in George's face, Julia saw that it was flushed with wine. He had only promised Ruth to come to the ball sober, and, forgetting all other considerations in the madness that Julia's presence had aroused, he had plunged headlong into the still more cursed madness of wine. He was not beastly drunk,—George was never that,—but just excited enough to make him fierce in his anger and reckless in his speech. Julia, chafed at his reproaches, exclaimed, as she looked him in the face,—

"If a drunken man were a responsible being, I would resent your words as they deserve."

"A drunken man!" echoed George,

slowly, bending forward and speaking through his clinched teeth. "You do well to taunt me with that! You made me drunk before ever I tasted wine; drunk with the intoxicating poison of your false lips; drunk to blindness with a fool's trust in a faithless woman. You have deceived my trust, overturned my faith, given me gall and wormwood instead of the happiness you promised. My life is what your hand has shaped it; and now, when you see me the worthless brute that I am, you taunt me with being what your perfidy has made me; that is worthy of you."

He turned to go away, but Julia interposed, flinging herself in the door before him.

"And your reproaches are worthy of you," she cried, bitterly. "You men are always ready to pack the burden of your iniquities on some woman's shoulders. The first man did so to the first woman, even in Paradise, and men have been telling the same old story ever since: 'The woman gave to me and I did eat.' If you are drunkards, felons, murderers, no matter what, it's all the fault of some woman who couldn't love you as rapturously as you deserved, and so spoilt the precious saints you would have been. Are saints made, think you, of such flimsy stuff that they can be spoilt by a woman's frown? It's base, it's contemptible, it's cowardly, to go whining about the wrongs you've received from a woman, and laying to her charge the very vices that are her justification in rejecting you. And what excuse have we women, when our hearts lie crushed and broken? or what charity do you extend to us, if, driven to despair and madness, we go one single step astray? Who but jeers and laughs if a woman is jilted and deceived? Who pities us if our hearts lie bruised and bleeding in the hand of some monster we are constrained to call husband? Who thinks of the temptations the worst of us resist, of the sacrifices the most selfish have to make? There is no career for us but to be dragged to honor or dishonor at some man's heels. If our hearts are wounded, we cannot fall back upon our brains, and solace ourselves with the triumphs of ambition, for it is unwomanly to have brains. Oh, the slavery it is to be a woman and not a fool! You men have bound us down under the heel of a tyrannous conventionalism, and then you blame us for being the narrow, contemptible creatures your social system has made us. You give us no room for intellectual action, and then you cry shame on us that our ambition seeks only the sordid triumph of a gilded wedlock. I might have been ambitious of better things if the world had let me; as it is, I am aiming at the only glory a woman is allowed to covet, and through the only channel by which society permits her to compass it, and I am doing only what thousands of women do, unblamed, every day. I told you, long ago, that wealth and splendor, by long habit, had become necessary to me. I thought you were as poor as myself. I knew that your indolent nature was not likely ever to lift the millstone of poverty from our necks, and I thought I was doing you good service in sparing you the additional burden of a discontented, unhappy wife; for I could not be happy, George, though I loved you, heaven knows I did,—though you would not believe, you would not listen——"

"Hush!" thundered George, unappeased by her tone, which had gradually softened till it became almost a prayer. "I despise your love, a vile, polluted thing, that you carry in your pocket, like a pack of cards, to gamble with. Look at me, Julia Malvern," he continued, seizing her by the wrist, and bending over till she felt his hot breath on her cheek, "if you had never loved me I might, perhaps, learn one day to forgive you, for they say it is natural for women to deceive, and I might forgive you for being a woman. If you could look me in the face and say you do not love me, even now, I might pardon you for being fickle and capricious, like the rest of your sex; if I had not thought you so high above other women, perhaps your baseness would not now seem so low. I cannot pity you for a woman's weakness, because you have shown yourself strong in evil where the sternest of men would have failed. If you were weak I might despise you enough to pity you,—I wish to heaven I did not hate you too much to despise you! Weak women sin for their love, but you, stronger than Samson, have sinned against yours. You have deliberately trampled your own heart, and the heart of the man that loved you, underfoot, and sacrificed your affection to the ends of a base and sordid ambition. May that love prove as bitter to you as it has been to me! may it blast and wither your whole life, as it has done mine!—this is my blessing on your betrothal."

"I'll not stand here longer to be in-

sulted by a drunken madman!" cried Julia, tearing herself from his grasp; and, with an angry toss of the head, that scattered her flowery coronet on the ground at George's feet, she hurried away towards the house. George stooped, picked up one of the flowers she had worn, pressed it to his lips an instant, then dashed it angrily to the ground, and strode away out of the summer-house. He appeared no more in the ball-room, and the next morning his mother found the following note on her work-table:

"When you open this, dear mother, I shall be on my way to Richmond, with an application to be sent into active service again. I did not stop to take leave of you, because I wished to spare myself the pain of parting. Forgive my selfish weakness, and don't distress yourself about me; but if the next news you get of me is in the fatal list after a battle, comfort yourself by thinking it is just the thing I wanted, and don't break your heart over a worthless dog like

"GEORGE DALTON."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BLONDE CURL.

IF Audley Malvern had been less engrossed with his own affairs he might, perhaps, have felt some embarrassment on his sister's account, that she should have been brought so unexpectedly face to face with George Dalton; but when a man feels that the destiny of his life is to be decided in the course of a few hours, it is not unnatural that he should be more absorbed in his own concerns just at that juncture than in anything else, and so, seeing both George and Julia apparently unmoved by the shock of the first meeting, he disturbed himself no further about them.

"They are both cured of their love by this time," he said to himself, as he moved away to another part of the room. "People always get over that sort of thing in time, so what matters it if a fellow does take a fancy to the wrong girl at first, provided he don't give way to it?"

With this sage reflection, drawn from his sister's experience, he dismissed her from his thoughts for the rest of the evening, and bestowed his attention upon one in whom he felt just then a deeper personal interest. Claude was looking radiant as usual. Her magnificent dress of gold-colored silk, with guipure flounces and pearl ornaments, would have been too *prononcée* for most women, but Claude's beauty was of a character that consorted well with a showy style of dress, and her appearance was, in every sense, dazzling.

Audley fastened upon her a look of quiet scrutiny as she entered the drawing-room, and continued to follow her with his eyes wherever she went, though he did not approach her, or ask her to dance till so late that she was engaged some half a score of sets ahead. He was not at all surprised at this, and appeared less disappointed than his words would seem to imply, as he composedly wrote his name on her card at the end of some dozen or more of others, and then sauntered off resignedly to await his turn. When at last it came, Claude was tired and did not feel like dancing, but proposed that they should sit down somewhere and rest instead. Here was the very opportunity he wanted; yet, why did he feel so discomposed, now that fortune seemed determined to play into his hand? What made him hesitate, and think a better occasion might offer later, when he went to say 'good-night,' for instance? But no, that would not do; the evening was now far spent, some sensible mammas had already ordered their carriages; the opportunity might not offer again, and must not be thrown away; so instead of seating Claude, as his first impulse had been, between two frigid old dowagers, whose presence would effectually bar anything like an "explanation," he led her away to a little cabinet adjoining the parlor, which, being too small to dance in, had been overlooked and deserted by all but themselves.

"And you are really going away to-morrow," said Claude, with a little tremor in her voice, as she sank back on the sofa, where he placed himself at her side.

"Yes," he replied; "but why remind me of anything so painful? Let me forget there is such a thing as parting while I enjoy the privilege of sitting by your side."

"It is a privilege you are very late in beginning to appreciate," returned Claude, reproachfully. "Your visits to the White House have become so rare as

to warrant the suspicion that going away will hardly be so painful to you as you make out."

"But I am sure you will not entertain a suspicion so unjust," said Audley, "when you reflect how little a military man is master of his own time."

"But you cannot have been so overwhelmed with business," replied Claude, "nor is the White House so far off, but you might have found time to make a flying visit here now and then if you had wished."

"Perhaps I might," said Audley, bending over her and toying with her fan, "if I had not wished *so very* much. Now that you drive me to the wall, Miss Harfleur, I may as well confess at once that business has not had more to do with my absence than another reason,—shall I tell you what?"

"Open confession is good for the soul, as my sister would say," replied Claude, evasively; for she guessed so well what that other reason was, that with a woman's strange inconsistency she began to dread as much as she wished to hear it. Audley changed color most unaccountably at this allusion to Claude's sister, and if she had observed a little more closely she would have seen the hand toying so carelessly with her fan tremble slightly as he replied:

"Well, then, I had not the courage to come."

"Courage! What!" cried Claude, pretending not to guess his meaning, "is the White House an enchanted castle, haunted by monsters and demons ready to prey upon defenseless knights, that it should require so much courage to venture here?"

"Enchanted, yes," replied Malvern, bending so low that his lips almost touched her hair, "and haunted, too, but by something far more fatal to defenseless knights than monster or demon. Many a cavalier who fears not man nor God has been conquered by the resistless power of beauty."

"And you, it seems, have shared the common fate," said Claude, with persistent coquetry, still pretending to misinterpret him; "and like a faithful knight you carry your lady's colors on your breast." She took her fan from his hand as she spoke and lightly tapped the cluster of pansies in his button-hole. She had been jealous of those flowers ever since she first saw them there, and she took a malicious pleasure in teasing him about them.

"I carry my lady's colors nearer my heart than that—if she will deign to let me call her mine," said Audley, stealing one arm around Claude's waist, while with the other hand he drew from his vest-pocket the little note-book that he made a general receptacle for all sorts of documents, love-trophies, Government orders, tailors' bills, *cartes de visite*, and a score of other things; but instead of turning, as he had intended, to the pink rose-bud enshrined there on the night of the tournament ball, the leaves opened of their own accord at the place where he had laid Bruen's portrait of Ruth. At that moment, of all others, he was least prepared to meet unmoved the warm, impassioned look of those speaking eyes. He felt his blood run hot and then cold through his veins, and an uncontrollable agitation shook his frame as he sat gazing at the picture with a look of tenderness he could not conceal. He might have hastily turned over another leaf; he might have stuffed the book back in his pocket, or shuffled the miniature under the transportation bill that lay between the same leaves, before Claude had time to perceive who it was, but the power of reflection seemed suddenly to have deserted him, and his natural instincts, to do him justice, were all against deception. At that moment, the conviction rushed upon him with terrible reality that he did not love the woman at his side, and he was overwhelmed with sudden shame at the treacherous part he had been acting. The nobler instincts of his nature, so long smothered under the teachings of a false and heartless world, asserted themselves at last, and he felt that he could not advance another step in the course he was pursuing. He did not stop to reflect that he had gone too far to recede easily; as we have said before, all power of reflection seemed to have forsaken him, and moved by an impulse he could not explain, he laid the picture boldly before Claude, and leaving her side, looked her unflinchingly in the face. The act was one of penance rather than pride on his part; he was thinking only of exposing and humiliating himself. He remembered Claude's motto, "open confession is good for the soul," and forgot the possibility of wounding her in this sudden act of self-condemnation. Self-convicted, he laid before her the lovely face that had brought him so irresistibly to a sense of his own falseness as any repentant criminal would expose the evidences of his guilt, and the look he fixed upon her was full of contrition and self-reproach, not of insolent triumph.

But Claude naturally misinterpreted both the look and the act. Burning with the just indignation of an injured and outraged woman, her first impulse was to spring from the sofa and heap upon him the reproaches he so richly deserved, but pride, that tyrant of a woman's breast, compelled her to conceal her wrath, lest with it she should also betray her love. With a steady hand she put aside the picture, without deigning to look at it, and said, as she slowly rose from her seat,—

"There was no need of all this, Colonel Malvern, to inform me of the real state of your affections; and if you imagine that I have ever been the dupe of your contemptible trifling, you are as greatly deceived as you take me to be. I found out what colors you carried nearest your heart long ago, and I now return this to you, with the advice that the next time you undertake to make love to two sisters at once, you will guard your trophies a little more carefully."

With that she opened a locket attached to her necklace, took out the blonde ringlet that Audley had lost the night of the tournament ball, flung it down before him, and without another word left the room.

Audley sat confounded. He had no difficulty in guessing how Claude became possessed of that little relic; and his cheeks fairly burned with shame as he reflected on the contemptible part he had been playing, and the figure he must have cut in Claude's eyes;—and then Ruth,—if she should suspect his treachery, that would indeed be intolerable: he snatched up the silky tress, and pressed it to his lips in an agony of shame and remorse.

But in spite of his bitter self-condemnation, he felt, he could not tell why, more light-hearted than he had done for weeks. It seemed as if a great load had somehow been lifted from his heart; that he had made a narrow escape and come out of a great danger, a little scathed it might be, but much better than he had expected. True, he had bungled confoundedly, and made a pretty mess of it,—and there would be the very devil to pay when mother and Julia heard of it,—but then it might have been so much worse; he might have been tied up forever by this time but for that lucky accident with the picture; but now, at all events, he was free,—free to love, at least, where he chose.

However, he had no time to indulge in reflections. It was clear he could not remain longer in the house after what had happened, and the best thing he could do now was to take himself off as quietly as possible. He would just speak to Mr. Harfleur, and leave with him his adieux for the young ladies,—that would be sufficient;—and yet, there was one he would like to see again just to say farewell; it might be a last farewell, for who could tell whither the fortunes of war might lead him? But no, perhaps he had better not trust himself with her now; he had already played the deuce sufficiently for one evening, and there was no telling what he might do if he were to see her again. Better keep out of that scrape at any rate; and, besides, if she knew what an infernal puppy he had been, how could he dare to look her in the face? No, he would not venture to speak to her; but if he could catch one glimpse of her, just to take a last look as one looks on the dead, there could be no harm in that.

He made his way quietly through all the rooms, carefully avoiding an encounter with Claude, and looking out eagerly for a vision of white tulle dotted with pansies, but it was nowhere to be seen; so with a pang of secret disappointment he took up his hat and prepared to depart. The crowd had thinned out a good deal by this time, and those that remained had collected chiefly in the front part of the house; so the better to escape notice, Audley made his way back to the little cabinet where his interview with Claude had taken place. There was a private door opening from this retired apartment on the piazza, through which he could make his exit unobserved. It was on the western side, that was so curtained by vines; and as all this part of the house was pretty well deserted, he thought he was in no danger of encountering any one, when, as he was hastily descending a little flight of steps half hidden by vines that led into the garden, he met a couple returning from a promenade,—and the lady wore white tulle dotted with pansies.

"What! going so early, Colonel Malvern?" she said, observing his hat and riding-whip in his hand. Just then the band struck up an inspiring galop; and the young gentleman, her companion, having a partner engaged, uttered a hurried "Excuse me, Miss Harfleur," and left her alone with Malvern.

"Yes, I must be off now," he answered; "and I was just regretting that I would have to go without seeing you. I have been looking all over the house for you,

while that impudent fellow Thorndale had you hid away in the shrubbery."

"But why must you go so early?" persisted Ruth. "Can't you stay till the ball is over?"

Andley shook his head.

"That is unpardonable," she said, laughing. "I thought I heard you engage yourself to Claude for the last set but one, and I am sure I have you on my card for another waltz and a schottische; so you see, colonel, you can't get off yet without most flagrant dereliction towards two ladies, at least."

"I am sorry," he said; "but even at the expense of sacrificing so great a pleasure as dancing with you, I must persist in leaving. To be candid with you, Miss Harfleur, I have just quarreled with your sister, and it would be improper for me to remain longer under this roof."

"Quarreled with my sister!" exclaimed Ruth, with sudden agitation. "And what could you have quarreled with Claude about?"

"I rather think it was about you," he answered.

"Me!" she cried. "And why should you have quarreled about me?"

"Ay, why should I," said Audley, with a smile in which there was less of mirth than sadness, "since you have never given me the right? But it is done, and I must go. I hope you are not going to quarrel with me, too, at the last moment, and we not likely ever to meet again."

"Never again!" and she raised her eyes to his face with a look of such sorrowful surprise that Audley felt his good resolutions fast melting away, and saw that unless the interview were brought to a close quickly he would be tempted to play the fool again in spite of himself.

"No," he answered, intending to make his words very decisive. "Even if I should escape the contingency that every soldier is liable to, there are reasons, Miss Harfleur, which will forbid my ever returning here. At the end of the war, which I fear is approaching only too rapidly, when I shall have established a home for my mother and sister out of such wrecks of our fortune as I can collect, I must then think of carving out a new career for myself. In the disastrous days that are coming there will be no place for me in America, and I will have to seek my fortune in some foreign land; and so, unless some strange destiny should send you wandering over the sea, our paths are not likely to cross again. I shall not attempt to express my sorrow at parting, nor the gratitude with which I shall always remember my sojourn here, because no words can do justice to either. The gratitude will always live in my heart, and the regret is half untold even in that bitter word which I am now compelled to speak,—farewell."

"Farewell," echoed Ruth. Her head drooped like a withered flower as she spoke, and Audley felt a scalding tear fall on the hand he had extended to clasp hers. It was the last drop that made the cup run over. Loosing her rosy fingers suddenly from his clasp, and catching her face in both his hands, he turned it up to the moon, and saw her eyes swimming in tears. He could resist the promptings of his own heart no longer.

"Oh, Ruth, Ruth! my darling! my treasure! my only love!" he cried, laying her face against his breast, "tell me that these tears are for me, tell me that you think me worth a single drop from those beautiful eyes, and your tears will be pearls that purchase me the happiness angels might envy."

She threw her white arms about his neck and nestled closer to his bosom, while Audley covered her lips with rapturous kisses.

"Audley," she sobbed, as soon as her emotion would permit her to speak, "take back those cruel words; don't say that you will never come back again, or you will kill me."

"If you bid me come," he said, pressing her closer to his heart, "there is no power in heaven or earth to keep me back. The grave itself could not shut me from your presence, but my spirit would come from the shadowy land to hover near you, and find its heaven in you. Yes, my soul, my bride, my wife,—ah, Ruth, only promise me that I may one day call you by that sweet name, and I would come from heaven itself to claim my right."

He was terribly in earnest now,—he who had been fooling and dawdling all his life,—he had learned at last what love really was. All his sage worldly maxims were scattered to the winds,—all considerations of prudence, policy, worldly ambition, melted in the flame of this new passion, that had been kindling unawares in his breast, till it burst forth in uncontrollable might, and overpowered every other feeling. It never occurred to him now that he was playing the fool, because the girl in his arms had neither name nor fortune; he never paused to think what his mother and sister would say, what the world would say, or, worse

still, how the world would go with a foolish young couple who had not a stiver between them; and if all these considerations had burst upon him at once, they would not have moved him a hair. He was a new man, changed in a twinkling, like one born again under the regenerating influence of love. To him at that moment there was no world outside the white arms that encircled his neck, no heaven beyond the light of those beautiful eyes that looked so lovingly into his own.

As for Ruth, the joy of the moment was alloyed to her with the thought of parting. The good Book says that "perfect love casteth out fear," but, if this is true, women's love is never perfect, for, the more they love, the greater are their fears. There is always a certain sense of foreboding mingled with the love that woman bears to man, as if all the woes and heartaches love had cost her, since the first man spoke his first chiding words to his companion in Paradise, had impressed themselves upon her race. No sooner is love born in a woman's heart, than a thousand fears spring up beside it. She loves not timidly, but anxiously, with a certain fearful looking for of evil days to come, when love, alas! may be love no more. So Ruth, even in the rapture of that blessed moment, was thinking of the parting that must come, and her first words, after that ecstatic silence which always succeeds the sudden consciousness of some new-born joy, betrayed the course of her anxious thoughts.

"Dearest," she said, raising her head from her lover's breast and looking him timidly in the face, "we are not to say good-by to-night, are we? You will come again to-morrow, if only for a minute, just to let me look at you once more?"

"Come to-morrow! That I will, my darling, if you think me worth robbing these bright eyes of their slumber for. I must come early, you know, before the rest of the family are astir, for I want you all to myself."

"Oh, nobody will be astir here much before noon," Ruth answered. "They will all be tired after the ball, but I can be ready as early as you please,—at sunrise, if you say so."

"No, I need not put your affection to such a severe test yet awhile," he replied, playfully stroking the beautiful golden curls that had burst from their bindings and fell in glittering masses over his shoulder. "I am not due at headquarters before noon, so, if you will meet me in the little cabinet yonder at eight o'clock, and leave the side door open so that I can get in without disturbing the household, we can spend another precious hour together."

As Audley ceased speaking there was a rustling in the shrubbery behind them, and the figure of the pious Æneas suddenly emerged into the moonlight. He turned his eyes upon Ruth as he passed with a look of malignant triumph, then vanished again into the darkness. Ruth shuddered as she met his glance, for he always produced upon her the effect of having seen a snake or a toad. There was something sinister in his look that reminded her of the threat he had made when they last spoke together, and ever since that day a secret dread of him had mingled with her loathing.

"He has heard us!" she cried, in a terrified whisper, as he passed out of sight. And instinctively she clung closer to her lover, as if conscious of some evil presence seeking to glide between them.

"What if he has?" Audley answered, with a reassuring smile. "I am ready to make good what I have said to you this night before the whole world whenever you will name the day." And he pressed her to his heart in an embrace that seemed to defy the whole world to tear her from him.

How long they remained there in the moonlight, heart to heart, hand to hand, immersed in love's sweet baptism of delight, neither of them could tell, but the last guest had departed and the lights were out in the house when Audley mounted his horse and rode reluctantly away.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ÆNEAS MAKES A REVELATION.

NEXT morning, long before the clock struck eight, Ruth was at the appointed rendezvous, busily employed with her own hands making the little room look tidy and cheerful for her lover's reception. Joy, like grief, banishes slumber from the eyes, but it does not rob them of their brightness like vigils kept in sorrow and in tears. Ruth had not closed her eyes all night for very gladness, but they were so luminous with in-

ward joy, and her whole face so radiant with anticipation, that she had never appeared more enchantingly lovely than on that bright, rosy morning, as she went gliding about in the fulfillment of her pretty womanly task, singing to herself the while for very lightness of heart. At last, when she had done everything she could think of to make the pretty little chamber more worthy of the king that was coming, and there was no longer an excuse for so much as retouching a vase or giving an additional pucker to a window-curtain, she surveyed the place with a look of quiet satisfaction; and then, throwing a light gauzy veil over her head, started out to wait for her lover at the garden-gate. As she opened the door the shadow of a man fell across the threshold. Her heart gave a great bound, and she sprang eagerly forward, but shrank back again with loathing and disappointment when she saw that the man who cast the shadow was Æneas Tadpole.

"I am not the person you were expecting to meet, Miss Harfleur," he said, with an officiously knowing air, which was even more offensive than the look of covert malice that accompanied it. Ruth was about to demand what right he had to suppose she was expecting any one, but remembering that he had seen enough the night before to give him the advantage in a retort, she checked herself, and replied instead,—

"You are a person, Mr. Tadpole, whose presence I always desire even less than I expect it."

"And you will desire it less than ever, I guess," said the pious Æneas, lowering his voice and approaching a step nearer, "when you hear what I have got to say."

He was talking to a woman now,—a woman whom he felt that he had in his power, and for once in his life he spoke boldly. Ruth felt a secret dread come over her in spite of her high words, but she showed no sign of striking her flag to Æneas.

"I have already told you, Mr. Tadpole," she replied, haughtily, "that nothing you may have to say can be of any consequence to me." And she retreated into the house, hoping to cut short the unwelcome interview.

"I beg your pardon," said Æneas, following her, "but what I have to say is of consequence to you, and I'll make it of very serious consequence, too; you'll think so," he added, coarsely, "when you see how it changes your prospects with Colonel Malvern;" and his sneaky little eyes gleamed like a cat's in the dark as he turned them upon her with a look of vengeful malice. Ruth would not condescend to answer this coarse insinuation.

"Will you leave me alone, Mr. Tadpole," she repeated, turning and facing him angrily, "or is it your intention to force yourself upon me when you know that your presence is not desired?"

"Such is my intention," said Æneas, coolly, and he seated himself on the very spot where Malvern had sat the night before to begin the tale of love to Claude that had miscarried so opportunely.

"You rejected me once with scorn and insult, Miss Harfleur," he continued, resuming the sanctified drawl that long habit had made a second nature to him, "when I offered you a virtuous and honorable affection; but it is the duty of a minister of the gospel to bear with contumely, and I might have held my peace if you had not listened to the addresses of another. So long as you alone were concerned, I might never have allowed myself to disclose what I know of the shame that belongs to you, for a minister of the gospel should harbor no malice, Miss Harfleur. But since you have seen proper to enter into engagements which will involve another in the disgrace and infamy which attach to your name, I feel it my duty as a minister of the gospel to speak. I would not have shrunk from that infamy myself, Miss Harfleur, but was ready to extend to you the protection of my own honorable name and virtuous affection, for it behooves a minister of the gospel to be humble; but a proud man like Colonel Malvern will hardly choose a bastard for his wife if he knows it, and you will find that your turn has now come to be rejected with scorn and contumely."

The malignant satisfaction with which he dwelt upon the last words betrayed clearly enough the motive that prompted him, but to Ruth at that moment his motives weighed for nothing. The vague dread she had felt when he first began to speak suddenly took definite shape, and in that horrid word he had so brutally spoken she seemed all at once to see the whole mystery of her life revealed. No, she did not dare to doubt that she was really what he had called her, and the conviction rushed upon her with a violence that almost took her senses away. Why else had she been banished from the spot she had but yesterday dared to claim as home, and thrust as it were into the very jaws of death as one for whom there was no place in the world? Oh, that the

grave had swallowed her up before this black gulf of infamy opened at her feet! For a moment actual darkness seemed to encompass her; her head swam, her strength failed, and her ears were ringing with a strange and terrible sound, as though all the powers of nature were shouting that horrid word in proclamation of her shame. One thought only shaped itself clear and distinct amid the wild whirlwind of horror and confusion that was sweeping through her brain,—the thought of separation from Malvern. But for that she could have borne to be the thing Æneas had called her, could have welcomed it almost for the relief of feeling that the hard conflict between duty and nature was over, and that she had no longer to reproach herself for her unfilial feelings towards Mr. Harfleur. It was the thought of losing Audley that bowed her head in despair and gave to Æneas's revenge its sting. She did not think of Malvern's casting her off, but she felt, with a woman's pride, that the thing she was could not and must not consent to be his wife. Æneas saw where the arrow had struck, and eyed her with the look of a snake preparing to devour its prey.

"Will you listen to what I have to say now," he resumed, after noting the effect of his last words, "or would you prefer that I should relate it to Colonel Malvern first?"

"Speak at once, since I must hear," said Ruth faintly, and she sank into a chair pale and dejected, but with a look of unblenching fortitude, like one who lays his head upon the block determined, since it must be so, to die nobly. Another man, no matter how deeply he had been wronged, beholding her thus would have felt that his revenge was more than complete; to the pious Æneas it seemed that his was just begun, and he proceeded to stretch his victim upon a rack of the keenest torture. Settling himself upon the sofa and coughing a little dry cough of preparation,—for even he felt at a loss how to go on with the atrocity he had begun,—he proceeded to relate, with brutal unreserve, the story of poor Nettie Bruen's sad career which George Dalton had already told to Audley Malvern, only detailing the incidents more minutely, like one thoroughly acquainted with the secrets of the family, and coloring his narrative so as to make Ruth's mother appear more guilty than unfortunate. Ruth listened to his coarse recital with forced calmness. When he had finished, she rose from her seat and tried to walk to the door, but her limbs failed under her, and she sank back into her chair with a groan that made even Æneas Tadpole feel something like a qualm. At that moment Audley Malvern entered. He started, surprised and shocked at the pale, agonized face that met his gaze. He had come with a lover's greeting on his lips, and his arms open to receive her, but she rose and retreated as he advanced towards her, while Audley, suddenly becoming aware of Æneas's presence, checked his lover-like ardor, and bestowed upon that exemplary young man a look ardent enough in its way no doubt, but not with the ardor of affection. He gave Æneas no other sign of recognition, but moved across the room to Ruth, and said, in a voice so low that his words were inaudible to Æneas,—

"Something has pained you, my precious one,—come into the garden, away from that intruder, and tell me all about it; it is my privilege now, you know, to share every sorrow of yours."

He attempted to take her hand as he spoke, but she waved him off, and turned away her face. Ruth felt that she had no right now to listen to words that were intended, it seemed to her, not for the woman she was to-day, but for the one she had thought herself last night,—so completely had Æneas's revelation changed her identity. She told herself that Audley must be made acquainted immediately with what she had just heard, and released forever from all ties to her. It was to hide the anguish of this thought that she averted her face and shrunk away from his touch.

Audley knew not what to make of her. He did not think anything a contemptible creature like Æneas might have said could influence her against him,—indeed, if he judged her character correctly, he did not think she would suffer any living being to accuse him in her presence, or that she could ever be set against him, except by his own act. Then he remembered the little drama in which he had been an actor the night before, in this very chamber, and his own conscience began to accuse him. He felt now, as the possibility of losing her dawned upon his mind, how inexpressibly dear to him she was, and what a blank the world would be without her,—no, no, the thought was intolerable now that he had once known the joy of possessing her.

"Ruth," he whispered, approaching once more the spot where she stood, and

fixing his eyes with a pleading look on her face, "tell me what all this means. There should be no concealment between us now; and I think, after all that happened last night, I have a right to ask what your present conduct means."

"*He* can tell you better than I," gasped Ruth, shrinking away from him, and glancing towards Æneas; "and when you have heard his story, Colonel Malvern, you will then, since I desire it, regard all that passed between us last night as though it had never happened. Mr. Tadpole," she added, raising her voice and addressing Æneas, with a look of deadly calmness, "you will please relate now to Colonel Malvern everything you have just told to me, without omitting or palliating a single circumstance."

She left Malvern's side, and, seating herself at a table, rested her elbow upon it, and, supporting her head on her hand, remained motionless, with her eyes fixed on the floor, and a look of desperate calmness in her face. Audley, hurt at her words and her manner, did not follow her, but, folding his arms upon his breast, stood waiting for the pious Æneas to speak. Mr. Tadpole, although he had come there intending that Malvern should receive the information he had to impart, felt himself taken by surprise. He had found it easy enough to wound and insult a woman when there was no one by to take her part; but it was not so easy to frame what he had to tell in language that would suit the ears of a man who always treated women with chivalrous deference himself and exacted the same from others. He felt instinctively that it would not do to use the same language to Ruth in Malvern's presence that he had used in speaking to her alone. In fact, what he had to tell was not a very chivalrous thing to say under any circumstances, especially when the lady concerned has a champion, and he began to feel very awkward about saying it. He had appreciated Ruth's character too well to doubt that she would immediately acquaint her lover with what she had heard, and release him from his engagement; but he had not expected her to throw the burden upon him in that curt way, and he began now, for the first time, to entertain misgivings as to the possible effect his disclosures might have upon Malvern. He did not suspect that the latter was already acquainted with the story of Ruth's birth, and he had taken for granted that the intense family pride of the Malverns, together with the hopeless pecuniary embarrassments under which they were laboring, would alike operate to prevent the proudest and the neediest of their race from taking as his wife a woman whose only inheritance was a pedigree of shame and dishonor. Such a step on the part of a man in Audley's situation would certainly appear sufficiently desperate to warrant almost any presumption against his taking it; but Æneas had not taken into account those stirrings of strong passion which, when they once do move men of Audley's character, override all considerations of prudence, reason—of common sense itself. Æneas thought now that he detected something in Malvern's face that made him suspect all at once it might not be altogether safe to interfere with him where his affections were concerned. Men seldom bear you gratitude for telling them disagreeable things, and what man yet ever found it agreeable to hear anything to the detriment of the woman on whom he had set his heart?

As considerations like these flitted through Æneas Tadpole's mind, he began to feel that the task he had taken upon himself was a very ungracious one, and he sat clearing his throat and coughing behind his hand, in abortive efforts to make a beginning, until Audley lost all patience.

"Do you intend complying with Miss Harfleur's request?" he said, sharply, and directed at Æneas a glance that was anything but reassuring.

"Oh, ah—y-e-e-e-s, certainly," stammered Æneas, jerking the words out spasmodically, "but the duty is such a —ahem,—painful one, and a—consideration for Miss Harfleur's feelings——"

"As for my feelings," said Ruth, interrupting him, "pray do not let regard for them trouble you any more now than it did when you were speaking with me alone."

Æneas coughed more violently than ever, and allowed Malvern to stride impatiently up and down the room several times before he recovered his voice sufficiently to begin his recital. At last, gathering himself up on the edge of the sofa as though he were sitting on pins, and fixing his eyes piously on the floor, he contrived to get out by hitches a very much abbreviated and ameliorated version of the story he had just told to Ruth. When he had finished, Audley went and stood behind Ruth's chair, and rested his hand on the back of it. In so doing he contrived, unperceived by Æneas, just to touch one of her curls.

and Ruth felt in that touch that he was still her own.

The pious Æneas was quite unprepared for the coolness with which his communication was received. Audley betrayed neither surprise nor anger, but, standing there with his hand on the back of Ruth's chair, eyed Æneas for some seconds with a look of quiet disdain, and then asked,—

"Have you finished, Mr. Tadpole?"

"All that I consider it necessary to say," responded Æneas.

"And pray, why did you consider it necessary to say this much?"

Æneas screwed himself a little nearer the edge of the sofa, as though the pins were becoming too much for him, and found relief in a violent fit of coughing.

"If you can't answer that question," continued Audley, "perhaps you can tell how you became possessed of this valuable information."

"My honored father," answered Æneas, "stood in intimate relations with the family when these things happened. He was their confidential friend and spiritual adviser in their troubles."

"And Mr. Harfleur's confidential agent, perhaps," suggested Audley, remembering certain circumstances in Ruth's childhood that had excited his suspicions.

Æneas coughed again uneasily, and his seat became so thorny that he seemed in danger of wriggling himself off the sofa altogether. Ruth was first to break the awkward silence that succeeded Audley's last thrust.

"Mr. Tadpole," she said, rising, and speaking with apparent self-possession, "you once boasted that you had it in your power to render me a signal service in revealing something that you knew concerning me, and, little as you intended it, you have rendered me such a service to-day; and now that there seems to be no further occasion for speaking to me, I hope you will confer upon me the still greater favor of relieving me immediately and forever of your presence."

Audley turned sharp round upon Æneas as Ruth uttered these words, as though a new light had suddenly flashed upon him.

"But, before you go, you will oblige me by explaining what that service was you had it in your power to render Miss Harfleur," he said, fixing a penetrating glance upon Æneas.

Mr. Tadpole appeared more embarrassed by this simple question than he had done yet. He retired behind his hand once more to take refuge in coughing, then, raising his eyes for an instant, he replied, with saintly magnanimity,—

"I only meant that I was willing to share with her my humble means, and to extend to her such protection as the respectable name and virtuous affection of a minister of the gospel could."

This was more than Audley could stand, and, before the words were out of Æneas's mouth, he had seized him by the nape of the neck and hurried him very unceremoniously out of the room.

"You miserable scoundrel!" he cried, when he had got him outside the door, "if you ever dare to mention her name in the same sentence with yours again, I'll shake the breath out of your body!" And he helped him down the steps with a shove that nearly took the pious Æneas off his feet; but that exemplary young minister of the gospel did not return to resent the indignity.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A CLUE TO THE MYSTERY.

When Audley returned to Ruth, she was standing where he had left her,—pale, dejected, motionless, as though every power had forsaken her, save the power of suffering. He passed his arm tenderly round her and laid her drooping head back on his shoulder. She made a feeble effort to resist, but he only clasped her the closer in his embrace.

"My darling," he said, in his tenderest tone, while he looked lovingly into the tearful, averted eyes, "I could have wished to spare you the knowledge of this altogether, or, if that were impossible, that it might at least have been reserved till the time when you should hear it, if need be, from my own lips. I think I might have spared you some of the pain that reptile has inflicted; for I am convinced he has told only the worst half of what he knows, and that the chief villain in these deplorable transactions was—not your father."

"You knew it before, then?" cried Ruth, catching eagerly at his words, and looking up into his face with all her soul in her eyes; "you knew it before—before you said to me what you did last night?"

Forgive her, reader, if at that moment her mind was too full of her lover to give a thought to the vindication of her parent.

"I knew it before I ever knew that I loved you," said Audley, imprinting a kiss on her forehead. "It was all made known to me long ago by a friend who had your good and mine at heart; but you see I loved you in spite of it, and always will love you in spite of everything," he added, as he pressed her to his heart in a passionate embrace.

She had seen her duty clearly from the first, and resolved to do it, but it seemed to grow harder and harder every moment. She had not intended that anything like this should take place. She had meant to speak to him as soon as Æneas was gone, and release him at once and forever from all promises to her. She would speak calmly and decisively, and then fly from his presence before he could have time to shake her purpose; but to resolve and to do are so different. All her self-possession had deserted her as soon as she found herself alone with Audley, and she stood in helpless silence before the man she loved, unable to speak the words that would free him from an infamous entanglement, unable to resist his encircling arms, unable, in short, to do anything that she had resolved to do. It was no use now thinking about calmness and decision; it was no use trying to conceal from him the agony their parting would cost her; that was beyond her power; but for his sake the sacrifice must be made, and she must say at once what she had resolved to say.

"Oh, Audley! Audley!" she cried, struggling to free herself from his embrace, "how could you, knowing all this, say to me what you said last night? Why did you ever ask me to be your wife, knowing how impossible it was?"

"I did not know it was impossible," said Audley; "and I asked you because I loved you. Can a man give a better reason for asking a woman to be his wife?"

"But if she cannot make him happy," said Ruth, sadly; "if she is to be as a millstone about his neck, dragging him down under a load of infamy such as I must bear about with me all my days; oh, Audley, it is impossible! With your proud name, your lofty station in life, your ambition, your brilliant reputation, to tarnish all these——"

"Never mind all these," said Audley, stopping her mouth with a kiss. "Since I knew you I have learned that there is something I prize more than all the triumphs of ambition."

"But your mother and sister——"

"My mother and sister are very dear to me, Ruth, I admit," said Audley, interrupting her, "but my wife—for my wife you are even now in the sight of heaven—is dearer still. I am aware of the duty I owe to my mother, and would make any other sacrifice for her sake, but between a man and his chosen wife even a mother has no right to interfere. My family will, I do not doubt, raise many objections to our marriage, and may not be disposed to receive you pleasantly at first, but when they know you as I do their prejudices will vanish like mine; if not, they must give me up, for I will suffer no human being, not even a mother, to come between you and me. Believe me, Ruth, I would give up the whole world for your sake and think myself a gainer."

"So you believe now, Audley," she answered; "but the time might come when you would regret your choice. Golden hair will change to gray, the softest cheeks will be furrowed by care, and the brightest eyes grow dim with weeping. I do not doubt your love, Audley; but a heavy load will weary in time, and by and by, when you find yourself clogged and cumbered at every step by the millstone that you have tied about your neck, you might sometimes ask yourself if a faded old wife, on whom all the world looked askance, was worth the sacrifice. Oh, my love, rather than cause you one such regret I would lie down and die at your feet."

Audley seized both her hands, and, drawing her to him, held her fast while he gazed steadily into her face with a sad, reproachful look.

"And can you think so meanly of me, Ruth," he said, at last, "and yet profess to love me, to believe in my affection? Question your own heart and see if you know what love is. You say that you love me; do you think that your heart would change if I were unfortunate, unhappy, disgraced?"

"Oh, Audley, you are cruel, even to ask it!"

"Would you cast me off and desert me if disease or accident were to make me a burden that would drag you to the earth all your days, and wear your life out with watching and waiting on an invalid husband? If shame and dishonor even were to come, and I were cast into

a felon's cell, would you forsake me, Ruth?"

"Audley! Audley! you know better than that."

"And yet, you think I am to be frightened away by the scarecrow of a censorious world. Ah, Ruth, you don't know yet half how well I love you."

He was driving her very hard, and she felt that her power of resistance was fast failing.

"Audley," she cried, "you know I did not mean that; it is not that I doubt you, but I love you too much to be willing that you should sacrifice yourself for me."

"As for that, Ruth," he replied, folding her again to his heart, "I am afraid all the sacrifices will be on your side. I am asking you to become the wife of a ruined vagabond, who has nothing to offer but a life of hardship and privation, —it may be of want. I have not a dollar in the world that I can call my own, and worse than all, I have not even the knowledge of how to make a living. Born the heir to unbounded wealth, I was never taught the first lesson that every man should learn, how to earn his own bread, and you see me to-day the most helpless and destitute and contemptible of all God's creatures—an aristocratic beggar. Once I was mean and base, as well as miserable, for I was a beggarly fortune-hunter, and had even dared to set my covetous eyes upon your sister's wealth. But you saved me from that, Ruth; the love of you broke in upon my darkened heart, and the good you wrought in me was stronger than the temptations of my own evil passions. Would you cast me off now and leave me a prey to them again? No, stay by my side, finish the work you have begun, and you may make something of me yet. Desperate as my fortunes are, I feel more of a man to-day than I ever felt in my life before. I am done with skulking about in search of an heiress to live on her money, and am ready to struggle with the world on my own account. I shall have to battle at a sad disadvantage I know, and my chances of success are small. I have no profession but my sword, which seldom wins a man aught but barren honors, and even that will soon be taken from me, unless I can find employment in some foreign army. The life of a soldier of fortune is not a very tempting one, Ruth, but such as it is, I ask you to share it with me. My love is not unselfish like yours; no,—I would drag you down to the very grave rather than be parted from you. I ask you to give up friends, home, country, everything, to share poverty, exile, and danger, to lead a life of toil and unrest, and maybe find yourself a heart-broken young widow some day, after a great battle in some far-off land. Do you love me enough, Ruth, to dare all this for my sake?"

He had not mistaken his ground: this was the kind of appeal she could not resist.

"I love you enough for anything," she answered, yielding without a struggle to his embrace; "and I'll go wherever you wish, and do whatever you ask. But, Audley," she added, after a pause, "our future prospects need not be so very forlorn, for though we are both without fortune, I have that here which would soon make your wife the richest-dowered bride in America."

She put her hand to her throat as she spoke, and warbled a few notes to show what she meant, but Audley shook his head. He had not yet freed himself from all the prejudices of his class.

"No," he said, decisively. "I cannot sit down tamely and let my wife support me. I may have been that sort of a fellow once, but it's over now; and, besides, I won't have my wife set up as a gazing stock for every ruffian that chooses to pay his money for the privilege of gaping at her. I am such a niggard of my treasure that I feel as if I could knock down any other man merely for presuming to look at her. I must have the very music of your voice all to myself. Yes, Ruth, you must consent to make this one sacrifice more for me,—and I believe it is the hardest of all I have yet required,—to give up even your art, or those brilliant triumphs of your art, which you are so well qualified to win. I am very exacting, Ruth; I would have you love me solely, me, egotist that I am, even above your art. Can you do this?"

"I love you above everything in heaven or earth," she answered, "and would give up my own soul for you; but, Audley, you must make me a promise, too, before you go."

"I'll promise anything, except to give you up."

"It is not that exactly," she said, "though it might lead to that in the end."

"Then you needn't ask it. You have promised before heaven to be my wife, Ruth, and before heaven I'll hold you to your word, until you wish to be released for your own sake. When

you tell me that you have ceased to love me, then, and only then, will I ever consent to release you from your promise." There was such terrible earnestness in his voice and look as he uttered these words that Ruth almost shuddered.

"No, no; it was not that I was thinking about,—you know I can never cease to love you, Audley; but——"

"Well,—but what?"

"When you go away from me and have had time to reflect on what you have done, you will be less influenced by passion and may learn to take a very different view of things. Now promise me, Audley, for the very love you bear me, if you should ever be conscious of a single regret, a single doubt, that you will, before it is too late, tell me frankly, and let me release you: promise me this, Audley, and I shall feel less self-reproach for the wrong I am doing in consenting to be your wife."

"Yes, yes," said Audley, laughing. "I promise that whenever I feel a desire to get rid of you I will let you know. And now that we have settled this matter, come and sit down by me: our time is short, and I have something to say to you more than I expected when I came here, —something that concerns you nearly."

He led her to the sofa, and, seating himself beside her, took her hand in his own, and looked closely at the gem that glittered on her finger.

"Do you know, Ruth," he began, after a little pause, "that I suspect you have here a clue to something more than that brute Tadpole has revealed?"

Ruth started. She remembered Mr. Harfleur's look when he first beheld that jewel on her finger, and the strange words of the man in the church-yard, and she began to feel as if it were enchanted, like some of those magic rings she had read about when a child in the "Arabian Nights."

"You know I told you," Audley continued, without waiting for her to speak, "that I believed Mr. Tadpole knew more than he chose to reveal, and I will now tell you a circumstance he did not mention,—whether he was aware of it or not I cannot say. George Dalton, when he told me your mother's story,—for it was from him, Ruth, that I first heard it,—spoke of a ring that disappeared very mysteriously a few months before you were born,—a ring that she prized very highly, for it had been given her by your father, whom she loved devotedly. The description he gave of this ring—for he had often heard it spoken of by others—answers exactly to the one now on your finger, even to the inscription inside, and that can hardly, by any possibility, be a mere coincidence."

"I know it! I know it is the same!" cried Ruth, greatly agitated, "for both my uncle and Mr. Harfleur recognized it as soon as they saw it. Yes, that explains the terrible look he gave me that night."

"Mr. Harfleur? When was it, and what did he say? Tell me about it. Ruth, as accurately as you can; more may depend upon this than either of us are aware of."

Ruth then repeated as clearly as she could all that had passed between Mr. Harfleur and herself, when she encountered him in the garden on the first evening of her arrival at the White House. Audley listened with rapt attention. When she had finished, he took the ring from her finger and examined it again curiously.

"The strangest thing of all," he said, as he replaced it on her finger, "is that it should have come back to you in the way it did. Have you absolutely no clue to where it came from?"

"No, none,—at least—there is something more, but it is so strange that I hardly know whether it really happened or I only dreamed it. I feel as if I had seen a ghost whenever I think of it."

She then related her strange encounter in the church-yard, with all the man had said to her. Audley's interest became intense.

"Did you ever see or hear of that person again?" he asked.

"Yes, I saw him once afterwards,—the day of the tournament,—he was the prisoner they were going to hang. Oh, Audley, he gave me such a look as he passed where we were sitting, and then, when you left me, Mr. Harfleur was so terrible! It was then he made that black bruise on my arm you uncovered at the ball; don't you remember? And he said terrible words to me. He cursed me, and said I was plotting his destruction; and he spoke of the ring, too, and said that I had lied to him about it. 'You have seen him before,' he said, 'and you lied about the ring;'—those were his very words; I can never forget them, nor the look of that man. Audley, Audley, could it be——"

The words died away on her lips, and she raised her eyes to his with a look that told only too plainly what thought

had flashed upon her mind. The same idea had often occurred in a vague, shuddering way to Audley himself, and he was startled to find the same wild fancy shaping itself in Ruth's mind.

"No, no, my darling, it cannot be," he cried, forcing the horrid suggestion from his mind; "no, no,—but he could throw some light on what we wish to know, I am confident. Whether the rest that remains to be told is better or worse than what you have learned already, I dare not conjecture. I have both hopes and fears; but of one thing I feel assured, this mysterious being is possessed of knowledge more destructive to Mr. Harfleur than to you. It is plain that the two men not only know, but mutually hate and dread one another, and Mr. Harfleur would scruple at nothing to get him out of the way."

"Perhaps he has already done so," said Ruth, with a shudder.

"He has done his best, I know," said Audley, "but as yet, I think, without success. I will tell you about that some other time; but now my hour with you is ended, and I am too selfish to let my last words be about another. Promise me again, Ruth, that you are mine forever; and if I should never come back——"

"I will go to you," she whispered, interrupting him.

"No, not that, Ruth," he answered, shuddering at the deadly meaning in her words. "I didn't mean that,—but never forget me; and now, good-by."

He kissed her tenderly, and in another moment Ruth was left alone, feeling as though the light of the world had gone out.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE PRIDE OF THE MALVERNS HAS A FALL.

As Audley rode along, on his way back to Sandowne, he began to consider for the first time the rashness of the step he had taken. He had been so inflamed the night before with the sudden joy of possessing the only woman he had ever really loved, and felt so buoyant after throwing off the self-imposed shackles in which he had so long striven to warp and fetter his affections, that he gave no thought to the damaging consequences that might result to his worldly prospects from the course into which he had plunged. Still, no feeling of regret mingled with his reflections as he calmly reviewed the situation. He was fully sensible of the utter recklessness of the step he had taken, and acknowledged to himself that it was a bad business,—a deuced bad business, yet he had no desire to be out of it,—nay, more, he was half provoked with himself for feeling that he would not be out of it if he could. "The devil take it all," he said, as he concluded these consolatory reflections, "but that girl has made such a romantic fool of me, that hang me if I ain't half pleased at the desperate state of affairs, just so that I can show her how truly I love her."

His chief source of anxiety now was about breaking the news to his mother and sister. They had gone to spend the night at Sandowne, after the ball, the bustle and confusion at the White House being too much for Mrs. Malvern's nerves. It was due, both to them and to Ruth, that they should be informed of the relations existing between her and Audley. He knew that they were expecting something very different, and would be terribly disappointed, and then there would be "the devil of a row!" but there was no help for it, so he determined to make a bold dash and be done with it all at once. "There's one comfort," he said to himself, as he came within sight of the house, "it can't last long, for I must be off at twelve, and it's already past ten. Still, I think I'll attack the enemy in detail; I don't want to make a row, and both of them together might be too much for my temper. If I can win Julia over, or at least persuade her to remain neutral, mother will be more easily managed."

He felt very uncomfortable as he thought of his mother's proud, handsome features, and the look of haughty displeasure with which she would regard him, and he hardly knew how he could answer the stinging reproaches which, he felt sure, she would launch at him. With Julia he would be on more equal terms, and he resolved, accordingly, to proceed at once to her room, and have it out with her first. He was spared the trouble of seeking her, however, for Julia was standing on the front piazza when he rode up, and hastened down the steps to meet him. She looked pale and haggard, as though she had passed a weary night, and there were great hollow circles about

her eyes, that told their own tale of sleeplessness and tears. Audley observed her altered aspect with anxiety and alarm.

"Why, Julia," he cried, as he bent down to kiss her, oblivious for the moment of his own private causes of solicitude, "what is the matter? You look as if you had been crying a week."

"Do I?" she answered, with an effort to appear unconcerned. "I didn't know that one night's dissipation would tell on me so. It's the daylight, I suppose,—sunshine is always so unbecoming, especially the morning after a ball. Come, let us get out of it as quickly as possible; I have something to tell you, and I can't say it if you stand staring at me like that."

She led the way into the parlor, closed the door carefully, then advancing to the centre-table, placed her hand on a packet of papers that lay there freshly sealed and directed.

"Audley," she said, still keeping her hand on the papers, "can you guess what I am going to tell you?"

"No more than you can guess what I am going to tell you, by and by; but I hope it is nothing *very* bad," said Audley, looking with real solicitude into her pale and tear-stained face.

"You, at least, ought not to think so," she replied, with a faint smile, "since it is what you have often urged me to do;—see there, can you guess now?"

As she spoke she placed the packet in his hands and bade him read the address. It was to Major-General Maurice Fotheringay Bagpipe, U.S.A.

"I couldn't stand the thought of it any longer, Audley," she continued, in a fainter voice, as though the very mention of him sickened her. "I wrote a letter last night after I came from the ball, putting an end to that engagement, and sent it off with Mr. Bruen's mail this morning; that package contains his letters and the ring he gave me,—I wish you would make arrangements for sending it through by the next flag of truce when you go to South Ambury."

"With the greatest pleasure," said Audley, pocketing the package; "but what," he added, with a laugh, "is to become of the diamonds you were talking about last night?"

"Oh, you may make me a present of a set when you marry Claude: you'll be rich enough for anything then."

"Humph!" said Audley, shrugging his shoulders and turning away as though he did not relish the joke. In truth, his sister's remark was not calculated to inspire very comfortable reflections just then; and Audley felt no disposition to pursue the conversation in a jocular strain.

"Julia," he said, assuming an air of gravity, and paying no attention to her last remark, "tell me seriously what this new freak of yours means; have you made up with George?"

It was some time before Julia spoke.

"No, Audley," she replied, in an altered voice. "George and I will never make up again. We have met once more, it is true, but only to quarrel worse than ever; and I hardly think it likely now that we shall ever even meet again. I have said that to him which no man can forgive, and he has insulted me beyond all hope of pardon."

"Insulted you!" cried Audley, with an angry gesture. "By heaven! though he were ten times my friend, I'll make him——"

"No, no, no!" cried Julia, interrupting him, and clinging to him in alarm, "it was nothing of that sort, Audley; indeed it was nothing that you ought to notice,—nothing but our same old quarrel over again, only more bitter than ever. We were both more angry, more outrageous, than we have ever been before;—oh, Audley! you know what we both can be when the evil spirit gets possession of us; and there passed things between us last night that can never be forgiven or forgotten. No, no, it is impossible that there should ever be a reconciliation between George and me; but I can't bear the thought of old Bagpipe now."

Audley understood her and was silent. He had tasted enough of love's sweetness to judge how intense its bitterness might be, and he read now in those hollow, sunken eyes of Julia's, a tale of secret suffering too dire for human lips to unfold. There are feelings that will not bear translation into words, griefs too sacred to be named, sympathies so fine and delicate that the tenderest language seems too coarse a medium for their expression. Audley felt this, and made Julia no reply, but, putting his arm around her, drew her closer to him, and kissed her affectionately. Julia understood the act, and its mute tenderness overcame her. A word of pity would have been offensive, but this gentle expression of it broke down the hard wall of her pride, and, laying her head on her brother's breast, she gave way to a flood

of passionate tears. Audley made no attempt to restrain her; he knew that tears were the surest relief of an overburdened heart, and Julia was only too little accustomed at any time to give her feelings relief in outward expression. Nor did she give way to them long even now, but, forcibly checking her tears, was the first to speak after that violent outburst.

"It is an unspeakable relief, Audley," she said, drying her eyes, "at least to be delivered from that odious marriage. I have been engaged to half a score of men since I quarreled with George, but somehow, when it came to the pinch, I never could bring myself to pass the Rubicon with any of them, and I begin to believe I shall die an old maid after all. I had determined to stand up to this engagement for mamma's sake. You know what she has always been used to, Audley, and, though she never complains, the privations and humiliations of the last few years have gone very hard with her. As for me, it made very little difference what sort of man I married, except that I really had not the face to impose myself on a good one; but after last night I felt that they were all alike impossible, and I must free myself at any cost. I felt the more at liberty to take this step, since your marriage with Claude will enable you to provide for mamma, and there was no need that I should now consider anybody but myself. What a plight we should all be in, Audley," she added, with a touch of her old levity, "if you had not secured your heiress!"

Audley's feelings at that moment can better be imagined than described. With the headlong thoughtlessness that characterizes men of his stamp where the gratification of their own passions is concerned, he had never paused, like Julia, to ask whether there were need that he should consider anybody but himself, and he now reflected with deep concern that her sudden change of determination must seriously affect his own plans. He owed a duty to his mother and sister, and that duty must be discharged before he was at liberty to think of the gratification of his own wishes. He seemed to see a new barrier spring up between Ruth and himself, yet even now the thought of resigning her never occurred to his mind. The difficulties that rose in his way seemed only to enhance her value, and render him the more ardent in his determination to possess her at last. He admitted with a secret sigh that years of dreary delay might intervene, but he swore to himself with a terrible oath that, come what would, Ruth should still one day be his. To do him justice, he was heartily rejoiced even now that his sister had thought better of the fatal step she had been about to take, for he would not have sacrificed a hair of her head to accomplish his own purposes. The disclosure he had to make was now become doubly embarrassing, but seemed more imperative than ever, so he resolved to speak out at once and be done with it. Leading his sister to an arm-chair, and drawing another close beside it, he bade her sit down and listen to something he had to tell.

"You have given me a surprise this morning, Julia," he began, twirling his moustache a little nervously, "and now I have one for you."

"Not a surprise, Audley," she answered, with a meaning smile; "I knew very well what Claude's answer would be before you asked her."

"D—n Claude!" muttered Audley, between his teeth.

"What about Claude?" asked Julia, on whom the gentle expletive was lost.

"Nothing, except that I haven't asked her anything, and don't intend to, and don't suppose she'd have me if I did," exclaimed Audley, blurting it all out with an impetuosity that quite startled his sister.

"Not spoken to Claude!" she cried; "why, I thought you had positively determined to propose to her last night!"

"So I had determined to propose to her fortune, but it seems that neither you nor I, Julia, are quite so bad as we have sometimes thought ourselves, for like you, my resolution failed me at the last minute. Honest affection, after all, got the better of my sordid rascality, and before I left the White House last night I did what only a fellow most insanely in love would have done—proposed to Ruth,—and was accepted."

"To Ruth!" gasped Julia, stupefied.

"Yes, to Ruth," Audley repeated, his courage rising as he advanced into the thick of the fight. "There is no use trying to cheat myself about it any longer, Julia; I have loved her like a madman ever since I first met her, and if she had all the felons in the State prison for ancestors, and debts double my own for her dowry, I would still make her my wife, though the entire Malvern family issued an edict of excommunication against her. There now, it is out, and you see there is

no use raising a storm about it; the united tears and indignation of the whole race couldn't raise a tempest big enough to shake my purpose."

To Audley's infinite surprise, instead of the storm of feminine wrath for which he had prepared himself, Julia replied to this outburst only with a quiet little laugh. She was so overjoyed to find that she had been mistaken in supposing there was anything between Ruth and George, that for the moment she forgot every other consideration, and could not help feeling a secret satisfaction in what, under any other circumstances, she would probably have regarded as the greatest misfortune that could befall the family. Audley did not understand what prompted the laugh, and it wounded him; he was in solemn earnest himself, and did not feel in a mood to be trifled with.

"Julia," he said, peevishly, "I don't see what you can find to laugh at."

"No," said Julia, checking herself, "you are right; the matter is much too serious for laughter, only I could not help feeling a sort of insane triumph at discovering that I am not absolutely the most reckless and insensate being in the world; and for you, of all men living, to crown the red cap of folly with its topmost feather!"

The apology was a very equivocal one, and Audley looked as if he hardly knew whether to take offense at it or to laugh with Julia. His affairs had reached a pitch of desperation that seemed almost to burlesque the common ills of life, and their utter irredeemability and gone-to-the-doggedness seemed to strike him at last with a sense of gloomy absurdity. He leaned back in his chair, ran his hand through the brown curling locks that clustered over his forehead, and answered, with a mocking smile,—

"Well, yes, Julia, I must admit that, for people who have been brought up with such proper ideas on the subject, you and I have both made an awful mess of our matrimonial prospects."

"That we should both have been struck with madness at the same instant! it's dreadful!" said Julia, in a tone that Audley, familiar as he was with her moods, hardly knew whether to take for jest or earnest. "If I had only known this sooner, Audley, it might have brought me to my senses in time; but my letter is mailed, and there is no undoing it now. Well, perhaps the loss is not an irretrievable one after all," she continued, with mock resignation. "I'm a tolerably good-looking woman still, though alarmingly close to the shady side of thirty, and, if it comes to the pinch, you know, one can pick up an old widower any time: they are always a drug on the market, and can generally be had cheap, those with the very best establishments often being knocked down at the first bid to second and third-rate belles."

"Why not try a bachelor next time?" said Audley, infected, despite himself, with her tone of flippant levity. "My friend the major would be no bad speculation, I assure you."

"Major Maelstrom? Out of the question; didn't you see how devoted he was to little Mary Dalton last night?"

"Mary Dalton! thunder!"

"Of course you didn't; you had eyes for nobody but Ruth Harfleur. Well, he just followed her everywhere; and then Ma Norgood has got him under *surveillance*, too. She takes him in tow whenever Mary is out of the way; and I overheard her tell him that I was a remarkably well-preserved woman for my age; that there were very few women of thirty who carried their years so well: so you see she has put an extinguisher on my hopes in that quarter. I'm a very audacious woman, Audley, but I know better than to enter the lists against a widow, though she were old enough to be my grandmother, and wore a wig and ate onions besides; think, then, when she is young and pretty, and has a mother to tell the ages of her rivals!"

"And he has seen the kin-in-law, too." cried Audley, pursuing his own reflections aloud. "Well, he goes into it with his eyes open, so no matter for him. I hope he'll make a diversion in Mr. Bruen's favor, at any rate."

"Yes, and in mine, too," said Julia, laughing, "as you seemed determined to set me on him whether or no. But I haven't come to my last ditch yet, Audley. There's Mr. Harfleur now; wouldn't it be odd if that fortune should come into the family through me, after all?"

"Julia," cried Audley, seizing her by the arm, "what do you mean?"

"Merely that his attentions to me last night were of such a nature as to give me to understand that I might become mistress of the White House whenever I chose. So you see my case is not absolutely desperate, though General Bagpipe is lost."

"Julia! Julia!" said her brother, sternly, "this not a fit subject for jesting. Old Bagpipe was bad enough,

heaven knows, but nothing to compare to the dark, cruel, dangerous man you have just named. I believe Mr. Harfleur would scruple at no hidden crime to further his own ends. I *know* him to be capable of plotting murder," he added, as certain passages of Ruth's early history and more recent transactions in regard to the mysterious wanderer Roby flashed across his mind.

"Murder?" whispered Julia, with a shudder. "You surely don't mean——"

"That he has actually killed anybody? No, not yet, to my knowledge, but he is capable of it, and has, as I believe, his heart full of murder at this moment. Rather than see you place yourself in that man's power for a single instant I would lay you in your grave without a tear, and unless you wish to incur my everlasting displeasure, Julia, you will immediately cause the attentions to which you alluded to cease, and never mention that man's name again, however lightly, in the same connection in which you spoke of him just now."

"I hope you don't think, Audley," said Julia, becoming serious once more, "that I ever really encouraged Mr. Harfleur's attentions. I have always felt a secret distrust of him myself, I can hardly tell why, and I never knew his eye fixed upon me without feeling a cold shiver run down my back, such as they say you feel when some heedless footstep falls on the spot where your grave will one day be made. Handsome and elegant as the man is, Audley, his attentions are even more repugnant to me than were old Bagpipe's. I'd as soon think of flirting with Mephistopheles or King Pluto. So make your mind easy on that score. Indeed, I shall never marry anybody now, unless you can give me chloroform, and have it over without my knowledge, like any other disagreeable operation; but I can never deliberately make up my mind to it."

"You shall not marry anybody against your will," said Audley, stroking her hair tenderly. "Julia, we have both of us this day shaken off fetters of our own imposing, and I do not think either of us will again shackle ourselves with the ball-and-chain of our own sordid ambition. We have permitted ourselves to taste the sweets of true freedom once more,—freedom of heart and mind,—and we will not sell ourselves again into slavery, will we, Jule?"

"No, freedom forever, *vive la liberté!*" cried Julia, waving her handkerchief over her head. "We'll turn Bohemian, and be a set of glorious vagabonds, with nothing to fear because we've nothing to lose. Ruth shall sing ballads in the street, while you pick the pockets of the listeners, and I'll follow with the pappooses to do the cheating and swindling; that'll suit my genius. And we'll go *nus pieds*, and eat brown bread and sleep in the fields, and—and what will mamma do?" she added, suddenly checking herself, and regarding her brother with that puzzling expression, half tender, half mocking, that so faithfully expressed the strangely-mingled elements of her character.

"What will mother *say*," replied Audley, "is a much more pertinent question to me just now. I must break this news to her before I go, and I confess I feel deuced cowardly about it, unless you will come and stand by a fellow, Jule," he added, coaxingly. "We have pulled each other through many a scrape, and I did take your part in that Tom Burney affair, remember, when all the family were against me, and would have married you to him out of hand."

Julia laughed a sly little laugh and shook her head.

"No, Audley," she said; "I have just been through with a little tempest on my own account this morning, and don't feel as if I could weather another so soon. Besides, my presence would do you no good just now; it would only add fury to the storm."

"What!" cried Audley, "you don't mean to say that mother really wanted you to consummate the iniquity of selling yourself to that old blockhead?"

"No, not that exactly," replied Julia; "but whenever any of my numerous matrimonial projects miscarry, she improves the occasion by giving me a little lecture upon my conduct in general, and reminding me of the importance of making a suitable settlement in life as speedily as possible, since I have arrived at an age when delay is very hazardous. Now, a review of my conduct during the last few years is never a very pleasing subject of reflection to me, nor are those little hints about my age quite as agreeable as they might be if I were ten years younger; and besides, occasions for these lectures have occurred so often of late that they are becoming decidedly monotonous, and I am afraid I don't always listen as patiently as I ought. I had just undergone a tremendous one when you came in, and I can tell you you could not

have hit upon a more unpropitious moment for your disclosure."

With this consolatory assurance she let him depart. Audley's feelings were not very enviable as he made his way to his mother's apartment. He knew her haughty, ambitious temper; he knew that every drop of the proud old Saxon blood in her veins would revolt against the contaminating stream he was about to mix with it; he knew that there was little hope of ever gaining her consent to the step he had determined to take; and what man, not utterly craven, does not tremble at the thought of defying his mother?

Mrs. Malvern was sitting alone in her room when he entered, looking very handsome, very stately, and not a little appalling, when Audley considered the nature of his errand. She always showed when she was provoked or annoyed by an unusual stiffness and stateliness of bearing, and Audley detected at once, by the unnatural flush on her cheeks and by a certain rigidity in her attitude as she sat gazing into the fire, that she had not yet got over the effects of her little tift with Julia. He pretended, however, not to notice these signs of disturbance, and commenced at once to pave the way for his disclosure.

"Well, mother," he began, kissing her and drawing a chair to her side, "I have come to say good-b'ye, and to tell you something before I go that I wish very much may not be displeasing to you."

Mrs. Malvern looked at him and smiled; she had her own conjectures as to the secret that was coming.

"I suppose, mother," he continued, not quite knowing how to get out what he had to say and beating about the bush to gain time, "that you have no objection to my getting married some of these days?"

"On the contrary, my son," replied Mrs. Malvern, "there is nothing that I desire more than to see both you and your sister well settled in life. It is true, you can better afford to wait than Julia, because a man's opportunities do not diminish in the same proportion as he grows older; still, I think you have put it off quite long enough, and the sooner you settle yourself now the better."

"Unfortunately, I am afraid I cannot comply with the latter part of your injunction," said Audley, "as it is likely to be a good many years before I am able to take care of a wife. I once thought of trying to get one that was able to take care of me, but that is out of the question now, so I must wait and work like any honest fellow."

"But surely, my son," replied Mrs. Malvern, beginning to look alarmed, "Claude Harfleur's fortune is amply sufficient to preclude the necessity of delay on that account."

"Yes; but I have nothing to do with Claude Harfleur's fortune," said Audley, warmly, "nor with any fortune at all, for the girl I have chosen has not a dollar in the world. I am the accepted lover of Ruth—the poor girl has not even a name."

Mrs. Malvern rose from her chair and planted herself in front of Audley with the air of Queen Elizabeth denouncing a fallen favorite. To do her justice, every mercenary thought had forsaken her then, and as she declaimed to Audley against his love Ruth's want of fortune came not once into her mind.

"My son," she said, fixing her haughty glance upon him, "have you forgotten what is due to the honor of the name you bear, what you owe to the memory of your ancestors and to the hopes of your posterity, so far as to commit the public scandal of an open union with this unhappy child of felony and shame?"

"And why not an open union?" cried Audley, firing up. "If you mean to suggest any other sort as more compatible with the honor and dignity of the Malvern family——"

"Audley! Audley!" interrupted his mother, shocked, to do her justice, at this interpretation of her words, "far be such a thought from me. It was the suggestion rather of your own evil fancy, and your present infatuation is due to nothing but that spirit of an unbridled self-indulgence which you have pampered so long. You never would accustom yourself to practice the least self-denial, and now, because you happen to have set your heart on a girl whom no man in his senses ought to dream of, rather than forego the gratification of a senseless passion you must make her your wife, though you know that in doing so you blast your own prospects forever, and bring shame and dishonor on one of the proudest names in America. Was ever such madness since the world began?"

Audley rose impatiently from his chair, and, resting one arm on the mantel-piece, stood for some time in silence gazing absently into the fire. He was angry, and cut too, by his mother's words, for harsh as they were he could not deny that there was some truth in them. Had he thought

of anything in this whole affair beyond his own selfish gratification? Had he not wronged even Ruth in asking her to link her fortunes with those of a homeless vagabond, whose love, perchance, after all, might not be worth the sacrifice? And yet his mother had been unjust too, for he felt that his love for Ruth was not a mere selfish passion: it was something higher and holier than he had ever dreamed of before. He was a man, too, whom opposition was very apt to strengthen in his determination, and Mrs. Malvern had certainly not gained anything by rousing his temper.

"Mother," he said, at last, choking down his anger with a great effort, "you wrong me and deceive yourself in supposing that this is a mere fleeting fancy like so many others I have known. I have fought against it too long, and struggled too hard, not to know better. I am not blind to the disadvantages of such a marriage, nor am I indifferent to the unfortunate circumstances connected with Ruth's birth. I have thought of these things, and regret them deeply, more deeply even than you, perhaps, and have struggled against them in my heart. Oh, mother, you will never know how I have struggled against this love! But it was too strong for me, and conquered pride, ambition, interest, all the host of selfish passions arrayed against it, and even my love for you cannot move me now. Ask anything else of me, mother, but do not ask me to give up Ruth, for that I cannot, cannot do even for you."

"And her father, even if she had a right to claim one, was a convicted felon," groaned Mrs. Malvern, fairly wringing her hands in desperation. "A wretch that actually died on the gallows! Oh, my God! a halter and a bend sinister on the 'scutcheon of the Malverns! Audley, are you mad?"

"I am madly in love, mother, which is the same thing, they say," he replied, coldly. "But to ease your mind in regard to that new device on the 'scutcheon of the Malverns, I may as well tell you that I begin to entertain serious doubts about our right to the halter, as I have some reason to fear that my future father-in-law has not yet met his deserts in that way. However the case may be, mother, I must entreat you to resign yourself, if you value my happiness, to the wife I have chosen. I am resolved to marry Ruth at all hazards, and neither entreaty nor remonstrance can move me now. I owe you much more than I can ever repay, but I owe something, also, to the woman who has given me her whole heart. It is little I can offer her in return, but I can, at least, be true to her, and that I will be to my last breath."

"Oh, Audley! Audley!" cried his mother, trying a last appeal, "is it not enough for you that misfortune has overwhelmed our house, but you must bring upon it shame and dishonor too? Is it nothing to you that the blood of the Audleys and Malverns, whose name you bear, has flowed pure and untainted for generations, that you should pollute it now with this foul stream of infamy and——"

"Mother! mother!" cried Audley, white with suppressed anger, "you forget that you are talking about my wife,—yes, my wife, for I'll marry her though the last one of my race disown me for it! If my family cannot receive my wife, then they must learn that—but, mother, why are we talking thus? You will not force me to choose between my wife and my mother, will you? You love me still, mother? Say so, and learn to love Ruth a little for my sake, and be kind to her when I am gone. She is very friendless, poor girl! and a little kindness shown her now will be of more worth to me than all the affection you have lavished upon me in the past. But I see that my prayer is not to be granted," he added, while an expression of pain and disappointment passed over his handsome features. "That is hard in you, mother; but at least let us not part in anger now. Kiss me once before I go; we may both regret it some day if you don't."

She submitted coldly to the kiss he printed on her lips, and then suffered him to depart without a word. Alas, proud woman! she little dreamed with what bitter remorse she would one day look back upon that cold parting.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MAJOR PUT TO ROUT.

One more person remained to be informed of the event which had so disturbed Mrs. Malvern's peace of mind. Mr. Bruen, as head of the family, and Ruth's nearest relation, if she could be regarded as having family or kindred at

all, might naturally be considered as entitled to confidence in the matter, and though Audley felt that Ruth owed her family little or nothing on her own account, yet he judged that it would place her connection with him in a more honorable light to obtain for it Mr. Bruen's sanction. He believed that the old gentleman had always meant to deal fairly by his niece's unfortunate child, however he may have been misled as to the proper means of securing her welfare. He had never, Audley felt sure, been a party to those insidious plots that had exposed her childhood to so many dangers, but was the dupe of Julian Harfleur from beginning to end. Besides, something was due from Audley to the friendship shown himself and his family, so he determined at least to go through with the form of asking Mr. Bruen's consent to his engagement with Ruth. He felt, however, as he closed his mother's door behind him, that he had had quite enough of the matter for one day, and resolved, therefore, to make his communication to Mr. Bruen in writing, which he did in a letter that reached Sandowne a few days after his departure.

The old gentleman received the intelligence with a great burst of surprise, and hastened to consult with his wife, as he did on all momentous occasions. Satisfactory as the arrangement might have proved to him personally, he well knew with what antipathy Mrs. Malvern would regard such a match, and he had some honorable scruples about allowing the son of a friend to be taken in such a snare under his roof.

But Mrs. Bruen, like most benevolent old ladies, was too inveterate a matchmaker willingly to permit a marriage to be broken up on any account. Getting married was an act sufficiently meritorious *per se*, in her eyes, not to deserve every encouragement. She had a natural sympathy for all sorts of love-affairs, and easily persuaded her husband that, while it would tend to hush up scandal, and preserve the credit of the family that Ruth should be legitimately entitled to the protection of an honorable name, he had it in his power to equalize matters somewhat with the Malverns by rendering the marriage an advantageous one in a pecuniary point of view.

"Why, God bless my soul, Margaret!" cried Mr. Bruen, catching eagerly at the idea, "that's just what I was thinking about. George has been after me ever since the child came home to make some provision for her support, and d—n me—I beg your pardon—if now ain't the time to do it. That young fellow deserves something, too, for his generosity and disinterestedness. You see by his letter he knows all about that cursed affair of Nettie's, and yet he loves the child enough to marry her in spite of it all. He's a d—d fool for doing it,—may the Lord forgive me for saying so!—but I can't help liking him the better for his noble disinterestedness. And I thought the rascal was after Claude all the time, and was trying to take the trumps out of George's hand,—ha! ha! ha!" laughed the old gentleman, in high glee that his favorite project was in no danger from that quarter. "But it's not odd," he continued, "that a young fellow should fall in love with Ruth; no, by gad,—and he stands up to his girl like a man, and he sha'n't repent of it. I've got enough, as George says, to provide for Ruth without hurting him; and as sure as I never mean to swear another oath, she sha'n't go to him empty handed,—d—n me if she shall!"

But these benevolent designs of the old folks were all unknown to Audley, whose future prospects must have loomed rather drearily before him, in spite of the glamour that love had cast over his eyes in those silent self-communings that he found such ample leisure for during the tedious days and nights that succeeded his departure from South Ambury. The prospect about him was not calculated to inspire cheerful reflections, and the scene became less inviting every day, as the little army approached the real "pine barrens,"—that desolate borderland which lies between the fertile rice-fields on the coast and the wealthy cotton-lands of the interior,—a dreary waste of sand and pines, where the gopher plows his sterile furrow, and the rude native rears his solitary hut, and trusts his starveling existence to the cold charity of a hard and niggard nature.

It was now near the end of February, when the air was filled with a soft blue haze from the burning fields and forests, where the planters had lighted fires to get rid of the fallen timber and the old growth of sedge and wire-grass that cumbered the ground; and, at evening, the sight of an old field on fire, with every giant pine wrapped in flames to its topmost boughs presented a spectacle grand and awful, like a fleet on fire. Sometimes the flames would get the upper hand of man, and then the major would bring his little band to aid the distressed planters in rescuing

their fences and corn-cribs from the devouring element. The major was a man of convivial temper, and could never resist the temptation to stop, after one of these little feats, and partake with his officers of the planter's hospitality,—that is, of his brandy-toddy and mint-julep,—a practice which did not tend by any means to the promotion of discipline and good order in his command. After they entered the "barrens," where the miserable hut of the "cracker" offered no such temptations, the major's fondness for the chase still remained a stumbling-block in the way of military success. If a rabbit ran across the road, half his men would break the ranks to give chase; while a wild turkey, a stray stag, or even a 'possum, would break up the whole army, and set them flying on his trail, with the major at their head.

In truth, it would be hard to conceive of a more unsoldierly rabble than the rude gang to which Audley, with infinite disgust, now found himself attached. The ill-starred Confederacy was fast tottering to its fall, and the country had been so drained of men to prolong the death-struggle of its two great armies, that to raise forces now was like draining the last drop of blood from the heart of a dying man. The most rigid exactions had not been able to muster at South Ambury more than three meagre battalions, consisting of the last gleanings of the conscription—unfledged boys scarcely out of their trundle-beds, and old men scarce out of their graves,—one-half unable, and all unwilling to serve.

Out of this unpromising material our old friend Major Maelstrom, who had been invested with the chief command, was directed to organize a band and lead it against the deserters; but partly owing to the fact that there were about three officers to every man under his command,—a notable feature of the Southern army at that time,—and partly because the major himself knew no more about military tactics than a well-trained cavalry horse, his band never did get organized, but went straggling along like a gang of gipsies, and so signalized themselves by their exploits against the feathered tribe, both wild and domestic, that they acquired the honorable name of "Milestone's Chicken Cavalry,"—the major's awful patronymic being degraded by the country people into that more familiar appellative. For mere personal courage the major was as brave a man as you would find any day, and if whipping the enemy had merely meant singling out the biggest fellows you could find and frailing them out with a big hickory like so many runaway "niggers," he would have been equal to the conquest of the world; but unfortunately, where thorough discipline and scientific drilling were required, the major was about as unfit to command as his men were to serve. He was by birth a wealthy planter, who had rarely left his home, except to go marooning or to consult with his factor in South Ambury, until, moved by an unlucky inspiration of patriotism, he had volunteered to serve his country in a military capacity. He was placed in the Quartermaster's Department at South Ambury, where he gradually rose to be commandant of the post, and finally general-in-chief of the "Chicken Cavalry."

To a man of thorough military training like Malvern, all this was exasperating in no small degree. He had made strenuous efforts to organize the major's motley crew into something like a regular military force, and might have succeeded in doing something with it if he had held supreme command; but the terms of his parole not permitting him to assume at present the duties of any but a very subordinate position, he was constantly thwarted by the ignorance of his commander and the inefficiency of the subalterns in this make-shift of an army. His company consisting of three men and a half,—one was such a small boy they didn't count him,—two corporals, six sergeants, an ensign, and four lieutenants, did not give much scope for the exercise of discipline; and at last, disgusted with the whole concern, and convinced that the country was going to the devil any way as fast as it could, he gave up the hopeless attempt to mend matters, and shot his ducks and tracked his turkeys with the rest of them; *à la guerre comme à la guerre.* He consoled himself by reflecting that for the wild, irregular warfare they were to be engaged in these undisciplined troops might, after all, serve as well as any others,—at any rate, they could not be more wild and untrained than the lawless vagabonds they were to fight against.

The expedition did not proceed at once to meet the enemy, but went first to join the remains of Canning's band, that had retired to a little town on the borders of Florida, which had been made a depot of supplies, and had become the military headquarters of the district. Here they found about two hundred men, but could

augment their forces by only half that number, since it was necessary to guard with considerable vigilance the quarter where the captured outlaw women and children were confined. The only method of dealing with the bandits was to destroy their huts and place their families under Government *surveillance*, for it was through the women and children that the gangs lurking in the swamps were provided with food and such rude munitions of war as they required. It was out of the question to make war directly against the men, for upon the approach of any regular force they immediately dispersed and concealed themselves in the swamps, where they were supplied by their women with provisions, or harbored by them in their huts at night. It was long before the War Department could bring itself to authorize a course that seemed so barbarous as dragging women from their homes and burning their houses before their eyes, but at last the depredations of the outlaws became so serious, and their women were such active auxiliaries, that it was a mere piece of political prudery to mince matters any longer, and so the order was given to burn every hut where arms or ammunition were found concealed, and keep the inmates under restraint until the country became tranquil. Still, the men charged with the execution of the order hesitated, and the outlaws, emboldened by impunity, grew more audacious every day. Several valuable salt-works on the coast were destroyed by them, wagon-trains bound for South Ambury and other depots of supplies were attacked and plundered, the residences of planters along the border were pillaged, and their families driven off, and finally a band of Government forces was routed and all but annihilated. A few of the outlaws, captured about that time and recognized as deserters from the Confederate army, were hanged as an example to the rest. The outlaws retaliated upon the next prisoners they took, and thus was inaugurated a system of butchery and murder too sickening for description. Previous to this time the laws against deserters had been executed with great laxity, the greater part of those captured being merely sent back to their respective commands; but now, the exasperated soldiery began to exercise the utmost rigor, and a war of extermination ensued. The black flag once unfurled, the fate of every man captured was, henceforth, inevitable death. Still, the deserters, hid away in their impregnable fastnesses, sallying forth now and then to attack some defenseless point, and dispersing again as soon as an armed force went in search of them, defied the utmost efforts of the Government, and forced it to the harsh expedient of cutting off their supplies by destroying the huts where they harbored and taking their families into custody.

But barbarous as such a measure may seem in theory, it was by no means the cruelty that a sentimentalist would make believe; for the persons placed under *surveillance* were clothed and fed at the expense of the nation, and better provided for than they ever were in their lives before. They were placed in charge of an officer named Carroll,—an invalid who had lost a leg in one of the early battles of the war,—and were jocularly known among the soldiery as "Carroll's family." If poor Carroll had been a hen-pecked Turk or Mormon he could not have been afflicted with a more unruly family, as our friend the major discovered when he went with some of his officers on a tour of inspection.

The camp or barracks where Carroll's family were confined was a large quadrangular space on the east side of the town, inclosed by rows of shanties, with a large shed in the centre, over a well of water, to protect the women when busy at their wash-tubs; and the whole presented an appearance not unlike the arrangements at a camp-meeting. There were some twenty-five or thirty families in durance vile at the time of the major's visit, and a curious picture did they present to those who beheld this strange Bohemian community for the first time.

It was a fine day, and all the world was out-of-doors. Tallow-faced, white-headed children, with none of the spirit of childhood about them, were squatted about on the sand or lounging listlessly at the cabin doors. Groups of sallow-cheeked women, ragged, dirty, and barefoot, with slouchy calico bonnets on their heads and the inevitable snuff-mop in their mouths, were dotted about in the sunshine, retailing the news of their little community or dandling in their arms little bundles of red flannel, which on closer inspection proved to be babies. Under the central shed a large crowd had collected to witness a fight that was going on between two amazons over a disputed wash-tub. The young women belabored each other royally; and the sympathies of the crowd were so lively that the fray threatened to become general, when the entrance of the

major with his escort restored peace for the time and caused all parties to unite their forces against the common enemy.

It may well be imagined the officers of such an expedition as Major Maelstrom's were anything but popular with the women of "Carroll's family"; and after the first hush of surprise they began to give utterance to their feelings in a strain of invective that would have taken the breath out of *poissardes* themselves. Malvern's dashing air and smart uniform—for he was a man very fastidious in his dress—seemed particularly to excite their indignation, and at him some of their choicest expletives were leveled.

"Yer nasty, stinkin' hound's puppy! what do yer come here to stare at us poor folks for with yer trimmin's and yer brimmin's?" said a stalwart matron, raising her head from the wash-tub over which she was bending, and disgorging a huge wad of snuff as she spoke. "Ain't yer afeerd o' spilin' yer fine clo'es 'mong us poor trash?"

"Does yer mammy know yer's out, young mishy-mooney, with yer Sunday clo'es on?" chimed in a bare-footed damsel, planting herself with arms akimbo in front of his horse.

Audley, unused to this style of address from the fair sex, and unable to retort in kind, where his assailants were females, bethought him of Dr. Johnson and the fishwomen, and amused himself by replying in terms of the most exaggerated compliment.—

"O fairest of creation!"

he began, ransacking his memory of the poets,

"last and best
Of all God's works; creature in whom excels
Whatever can to sight or thought be formed;
Holy, divine, good, amiable, or sweet;
Why dost thou ask——"

"Hold yer consarned tongue, yer vile whelp o' a hound!" broke in the fair amazon, shaking her ample fist in the air. "Yer'd better take yer monkey's riggin's whar they'se wanted, an' be dratted to yer!"

"O! quam te memorem virgo? namque haud tibi vultus
Mortalis, nec vox hominem sonat,"

returned Audley, with a flourishing bow, falling back upon his classics.

The women stared at each other stupefied.

"Shet yer tarnation mouth," began the undaunted amazon; but she was herself arrested by the first speaker pulling at her sleeve.

"Shet up, Sukey, shet up," whispered the prudent matron, her elbows dripping with soap-suds; "he can beat us all to pieces a cussin'."

Thus driven from their ground, they next turned their attention to the major, who sat on his horse choking with laughter at Audley's adventure. A "snaggle-toothed old dirt-dauber," a "catterblasted, pizen alligator," a "consarned, bedratted, beslattered old collerwhopper," were some of the mildest epithets bestowed upon him. The major, having no Latin at his command, stood it all in silence as long as he could, but after awhile his patience gave way, and he began to curse and swear back at them, regardless of race, sex, or previous condition. This only made matters worse, for the louder he swore the shriller screeched the female chorus, until he seemed to have all Bedlam at his heels, and at last in desperation he drew his sword and vowed that he'd cut the tongue out of the next one that opened her mouth. Upon this the women all stretched their mouths and darted out their snuff-coated tongues as if they were undergoing a medical examination. The major, whose experience with women had been very limited, was beside himself.

"By Jove! Carroll," he cried, turning to the unfortunate head of this interesting family, "why don't you take a hickory to some of these jades? You've got no more discipline here than if it was a hog-pen."

"That's so, major," said Carroll, touching his hat; "but I don't see how it is to be helped, sir, for you know, sir, whatever they may do, I cannot forget that they are women, and women in distress."

"Right, Carroll, right," said the major, forgetting his anger in an instant. "You are a soldier and a gentleman, Carroll. Fire away, old woman," he continued, turning to a withered old witch who had been particularly violent in her abuse; "cuss as much as you please; I don't mind." And, putting spurs to his horse, the major fled at full gallop out of the camp.

"By Jove! Malvern," he said, reining in his steed and wiping the sweat from his forehead, when they stood safe outside the inclosure, "I would rather storm the trenches at Balaklava single-handed than go through with that again."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

UNDER THE BLACK FLAG.

HAVING found their friends, and reinforced themselves with the remains of Canning's shattered band, the next thing for the major's men to do was to find the enemy they had come to fight against,—a task which proved the most difficult part of their undertaking. The troops now under the major's command numbered nearly eight hundred, and, with their superior equipments, would have been quite sufficient to deal with any force the enemy could muster, if they could only find an enemy to deal with. On the approach of anything like a regular force, the outlaws immediately dispersed and retreated to their hiding-places, skulking about in fens and morasses utterly inaccessible to more unwieldy bodies. It was in vain the major hurried, unimpeded by venison and wild ducks, which were pretty well exterminated in that region, to any district where he heard that depredations were being committed; he arrived only to find the place plundered and deserted, and to hear of disorder and violence in some other quarter. Upon hastening to this new scene of action the enemy vanished before him, and, while he was scouring bog and brake in fruitless search, the slippery vagabonds would come to light in some other part of the country,—now emerging stealthily from their dens to commit petty thefts on hen-roosts and pig-sties, now sallying forth in armed bands to capture a wagon-train or plunder a plantation of its stores. The wisdom with which these little expeditions were planned, striking at the very point where the greatest damage could be done and the smallest risk incurred, the boldness with which they were executed, the skill with which the outlaws baffled their pursuers, and the something like discipline and concert of action that seemed to reign among them of late, all appeared to indicate that they were directed by a leader of no ordinary ability, and there was a rumor in the country that this leader was an escaped prisoner from Andersonville, who had joined the deserters a short time before Canning's defeat. Whoever he was, he understood to perfection the Fabian art, for never since the days of Hannibal was any leader so put to it for want of an enemy to fight as our poor friend the major, wearing himself out in hopeless pursuit of an invisible foe.

After wasting several weeks in unavailing marches and counter-marches, the major, by Audley's advice, determined upon a change of tactics. Dividing his forces, he kept three hundred men under his own command stationed at some central point, ready to proceed at a moment's notice to any quarter where their services might be needed, while the rest of the band was cut up into small detachments of twenty-five or fifty men each and sent to scour the country in every direction.

By this means a large area could be invested at once, and the success of the plan soon became apparent in the great number of culprits overtaken and brought to justice, as well as in the rapid increase of "Carroll's family," though the horrors of the conflict were, unfortunately, augmented in the same proportion, as the dark recesses of brake and jungle became the scene of many a desperate encounter where no quarter was given.

These conflicts were not on a large scale as to numbers, there being often only two or three, and seldom more than half a score, engaged on either side, but they were fought to extermination, and woe to the unhappy wretch that fell alive into the hands of his enemies! Infuriated at the destruction of their homes, and burning to avenge the stern justice meted to their comrades, the "bush-whackers," as they were called, scrupled at no atrocity that revenge or hatred dictated. More than once the major's men, in riding through lonely places, had suddenly come upon the blackened corpse of some missing comrade dangling over their heads, mingling its putrid odors with the fragrance of the jessamine and muscadine that hung, perchance, from the self-same bough, and had already begun to wind their young tendrils about its cold, stark fingers, still clinched as they had been in the dying agony. Or, perchance, it might be only a ghastly skeleton that met their view, with a few tattered shreds fluttering about its whitened bones, still propped against the tree to which it had been bound a living, breathing thing, warm with life and love, to await the fatal bullet that made it this homeless waif from the tomb. It was now near the middle of March, the joyous May-time of that warm, austral region; but the breath of spring was polluted with odors of death, and the screaming of vultures resounded through the land where the voice of the turtle was wont to be heard.

About this time Audley met with an adventure that made a deep impression on his mind. One evening as he was riding along attended by a single corporal,—an uncouth rustic, whose intimate knowledge of the country and undoubted fidelity rendered him very useful to the colonel,—he imprudently allowed himself to become separated from the squad that he usually kept near his person. He halted a little before sunset on the brow of a gentle slope leading down to the margin of a small creek, waiting for the rest of his party to come up and pitch camp there for the night. It was a favorable spot for a bivouac, the slight elevation of the ground giving them every advantage of position in case of an attack, and the reeds along the stream providing forage for their horses. As Audley stood quietly surveying the scene, he observed something white fluttering among the bushes that crowned the opposite slope, and the next minute a man emerged from the thicket bearing aloft a white rag stuck upon the point of a bayonet. He walked rapidly along till he reached the open space where the road led over the hill, then halted and commenced waving his rude banner violently, as if anxious to attract attention.

Audley hesitated a moment. It was against all military precedent to parley with enemies who had forfeited belligerent rights; yet in this irregular warfare some irregular proceedings must be admitted, and his instincts of humanity made him shrink from replying to the peaceful overture with a bullet; a course of action, moreover, which would not be altogether prudent just then, since the bushwhacker no doubt had friends within reach, and in case of an encounter would probably be backed by more men than Audley and his single attendant could withstand. In view of all these considerations, he thought that circumstances warranted a departure from the strict letter of his instructions, if for no other purpose than to gain time for his own men to come up; so beckoning the corporal to him, he pinned a pocket-handkerchief to the point of his bayonet, and ordered him to flourish it aloft. The outlaw understood the signal, and advanced boldly down to the margin of the creek, where, after snapping his musket to show that it was unloaded, he leaned it against the trunk of a tree, then stood with his arms folded on his breast waiting for Malvern to come down on the other side. Ordering his corporal to keep on the watch, and be ready to do his part in case of foul play, Audley rode down to the water's edge, and demanded of the outlaw what he wanted. At the sound of his voice the man gave a start, and seemed to peer eagerly through the gathering twilight to get a good view of the young officer's features. Audley, suspicious of the man's scrutiny, and impatient of his silence, admonished him again, in no gentle terms, to make known his errand.

"Can't you speak out, and say what you want?" he demanded, peremptorily. "I am not in the habit of parleying with vagabonds like you, and I have no time to waste on you."

"And yet, since you have condescended to receive me," replied the tall bushwhacker, drawing himself up to his full height, "I ought not to find it necessary to remind a soldier and a gentleman like Colonel Malvern that a flag of truce usually protects its bearer from insult as well as from injury."

To hear himself thus addressed by name was strange enough, but to be rebuked on a point of military etiquette by a rude brigand in the backwoods of Georgia was too much for the equanimity of the brilliant West Pointer, and he stood stupefied with astonishment. Such language from the mouth of an abandoned robber,—so dignified, so courteous, even in rebuke, and, above all, spoken with that cultivated, patrician accent which marks a man even more than his words, was enough to strike the hearer dumb. It was too dark down there in the hollow to get a distinct view of the stranger's features, separated as the two interlocutors were by the creek flowing between them, but Audley could see that he was a man considerably advanced in years, and of rather imposing appearance, notwithstanding the poverty of his attire, which consisted of a red flannel shirt, a pair of white homespun trousers, cavalry boots, with holes in the toes, and an old slouched hat, that entirely shaded his features. There was something in his bearing that seemed to command respect, and the young man felt half ashamed of himself for having merited a rebuke, the justice of which he frankly acknowledged.

"You are right, stranger," he said, urging his horse a step or two forward, till its forefeet stood in the water, "since I have consented to speak with you; but the interview must be brief. You are probably aware, since you are so well posted in the military code, that I could

be court-martialed for treating with you at all."

The outlaw bowed.

"My business is quickly told," he said. "I come to beg leave to surrender myself into your hands."

"Surrender!" cried Audley. "You know the conditions?"

"I had hoped they might be modified in my case, as——"

"The inevitable doom of deserters, by the military code of all nations, is death," said Audley, interrupting him.

"But, colonel," replied the man, "you cannot call me a deserter, since I never was in the army."

"That is just the trouble with fellows like you," said Audley, sharply, "that you can't be made to go where we want to put you—in the army. Every man that shirks his duty in times like these is a deserter and a traitor."

"I have shirked no duty, colonel," said the man, proudly, "for your country has no claim upon me. I am a foreigner by birth, and my present position is not of my own seeking, but has been forced upon me by circumstances that might well have driven a man to worse things. But, alien as I am, I would not willingly raise a finger against your country, and I promise, colonel, if you will receive me, to make as zealous and trusty a soldier as any that are serving under your banners. I have only one condition to ask,—that I may not be required to serve against these poor devils who have been my comrades. They have befriended me when I was in great straits, and on no account could I ever consent to betray them or do them an injury. They know that my association with them is but temporary, therefore there is no treachery in the proposal I make you. But I couldn't fight against them, colonel; you understand me?"

"Perfectly," said Audley, admiring the fellow's rude loyalty; "but I have no authority to treat with you. If you surrender, it must be to throw yourself solely upon the clemency of the Government. I can only promise you my recommendation to mercy, and I think it but fair to warn you at the same time that the laws of the land have been fearfully outraged, and those in authority are disposed to proceed with the utmost rigor."

"But, colonel," persisted the man, "your country needs men to fight for her, and is perishing for want of them. I offer you not one stout soldier merely," stretching forth his right arm to show how strong and muscular it was, "but twenty. There are nineteen sturdy fellows waiting in the swamp yonder, who are tired of this vagabond life, and would gladly exchange it for that of regular soldiers,—nineteen sound, strapping, trusty fellows. Yes, trusty as steel; I'll answer for their faith."

"And who will answer for yours?" said Audley, with quiet sarcasm.

"That must answer for itself," replied the outlaw, haughtily. "If you will ride to the opposite hill-top yonder, I will show you my nineteen men so that you can count them on your fingers. Come with me, colonel, if only to convince yourself that I am acting in good faith. I place myself as a hostage in your hands. You can keep your pistol clapped to my head as I walk along by your side."

Audley hardly knew what to think of this strange proposal. If it was to entrap him into a snare, he would gain nothing by betraying his suspicions, since twenty men could dispose of him and his one follower as they pleased without any ceremony. If, on the other hand, the bushwhacker was sincere, he had no power to make terms with him, as he had that very morning received fresh dispatches from headquarters commanding him to proceed with the utmost rigor against offenders, and to spare absolutely none, except those who chose to purchase life by betraying their leaders. He concluded, however, that it was best to go with the stranger, as that would at least gain time in case foul play was intended, during which his own men might come up. Accordingly, with an air of perfect *sang-froid*, he ordered the mosstrooper to take up his musket and lead the way. "I can dispense with the pleasure of clapping a pistol to your head," he added, carelessly, "though you must excuse me, my honest friend, if I take the precaution to carry one in my hand."

He cocked his revolver as he spoke, and, giving the reins a little twitch, allowed his horse to cross the creek, and follow the bushwhacker slowly up the ascent on the other side.

"Now, colonel," said the latter, when they halted at the top, "keep your eyes fixed on that sand-hill yonder," pointing to a low, sandy ridge in front of them, that formed a sort of water-shed between two great cypress-swamps, "and count your men as they pass."

He put his hands to his mouth, so as to form a sort of trumpet, and gave a loud, long whistle that waked the forest echoes far around. A few moments after, a tall brigand emerged cautiously from the thicket, then another, and another, in succession, till the whole nineteen had filed over the brow of the ridge and disappeared in the opposite brake. Slowly and silently they wended their way, their uncouth figures dimly defined against the evening sky, like ghosts of some slaughtered army come back, in the gloaming, to trace their death-march over again. When the last one had disappeared, the bushwhacker turned to Audley, and said,—

"There go nineteen men as brave and true as ever shouldered a musket, if you choose, colonel, to turn their courage to account."

"I have no choice in the matter," said Audley. "My orders are decisive and explicit, unless you choose to wait until I can communicate with my superiors."

"Wait!" echoed the man, in a disappointed tone. "What I require must be done quickly, or it will be forever too late. Colonel Malvern," he added, in an altered voice, drawing nearer and laying his hand on the horse's mane, "if I could make you believe me——" He paused and looked wistfully into Malvern's face, as though there were something he was longing to say; then, suddenly changing his mind, he turned away without finishing the sentence, and disappeared in the thicket. His look sent a strange thrill through Audley's frame: had he really seen that face before, or were the uncertain shadows of evening only playing with his fancy?

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SHOOTING A MAN IN THE BACK.

The next day as Audley, attended by the corporal, was riding along the outskirts of a great swampy wilderness, making some necessary observations on the nature of the country he was about to invest, the corporal suddenly laid his hand on the colonel's rein and, checking his steed, directed his attention by a silent gesture to an object looming through the brush-wood, only a few hundred paces in front of them. It was the body of a tall bushwhacker, standing just on the edge of the brake, in an attitude of intense expectancy, with his hand on the lock of his musket, his lank, crane-like neck stretched to its utmost, and his head bent eagerly forward, as though straining every nerve to catch a sight of something he was looking for down the road. His back was turned in the direction from which Audley was approaching, and his lower extremities were partially concealed in the tall marsh-grass, so that the most conspicuous thing about him was an expanse of angular shoulder-blade, marked with a great X where his suspenders crossed over the back of his tattered shirt, drawing the waistband of his breeches half-way up to the nape of his neck, and making his whole figure present very much the appearance of a pair of tongs. He was standing so as to command a clear view of the long causeway that skirted the swamp, while he was himself entirely concealed by the thicket, except from a certain point where the road, cutting through an angle of the brake, revealed his lurking-place for an instant to one approaching from the southern extremity of the causeway. It was on this spot that the corporal had checked his commander's horse, when his practiced eye first caught sight of the enemy. Evidently, he had heard their approach, and was on the watch for them, but had mistaken the direction of the sound. This was fortunate, for had he perceived the cavalrymen, the bullet that sped one of them to eternity would have been their first warning of his presence. At any instant he might turn his head, and then life would be the prize of the readiest rifle and the steadiest aim. There was no choice now but to shoot or be shot, since the slightest movement on their part must inevitably attrack the bushwhacker's attention, and he had full sweep of the road in every direction. The corporal took in the situation at a glance, and was ready for it.

"Now, colonel," he whispered, leveling his musket, "here goes for a plumper. I'll send that 'ere rogue a bosom friend this time, or my name ain't Jack Peevy."

"Fie, Jack!" returned Malvern, who felt a chilvalrous repugnance to taking an enemy so unawares; "would you shoot a man in the back like a dog, and not even give him a chance to look out for himself?"

"Ha, colonel! I'd like to know what your chances would be ef I was to wait for him yonder to turn his head. Them sharp-shooters never misses their aim, they

don't, and the star on a officer's breast is the mark they likes the best."

Before Audley could reply, whizz went the corporal's rifle, and the next instant the sharp-shooter lay on his face among the bushes. The two men hastened to the spot where he had fallen, and found that the corporal's bullet had done its work speedily and well. So swift had been the stroke that the victim was dead before the report of the gun that killed him had ceased to echo through the swamp, and the warmth of his touch still lingered on the musket that had dropped from his hand, when the hand itself was motionless forever. But men brutalized by war learn to look upon death unmoved. The corporal turned over the body of the fallen sharp-shooter with his foot, whistling gayly to himself as he did so an old love-ditty, but his song suddenly ceased when the features of the dead man met his view.

"By jingo!" he cried, starting back and gazing at the corpse with a look of stupid surprise, "I'm cussed ef tain't Minie Bill hisself; I knowed him afore he deserted, and there warn't sich another shot in all the army. Bill Huckster was his name, but the boys called him Minie Bill, 'cause he could send a minie-ball so true. I tell you what, colonel, it's good luck for you I took a pop at him afore he caught sight o' your stars and bars. Ha! tain't everybody could a' took Minie Bill off so slick!"

"Poor devil! we took him off a little unfairly though," said Malvern, with a touch of chivalrous compunction, which the coarser nature of his companion was incapable of sharing. "It ain't a gallant action, Jack, to shoot an enemy in the back like that."

"Yes, that part of it do sound bad," said Jack, turning the corpse back upon its face with his bayonet: "but, by golly, colonel, that was a bully hit o' mine! I took my aim straight at the spot whar you see his gallowses crosses here in the middle of his back," punching with the point of his bayonet into the oozy hole where his bullet had passed through the dead man's spine, "and she went straight as your hand to your mouth with vittles. Minie Bill hisself couldn't 'a beat that shot."

He stooped as he spoke, with the air of a gratified connoisseur, to examine the evidences of his skill more closely, and escaped, in doing so, a bullet that came hissing through the brake, and, after grazing Audley's cheek, passed directly over the corporal's head. The two men sprang instantly each behind a tree, as the only protection against this unseen foe. The corporal quickly reloaded his musket; then, balancing his hat on the end of it, advanced it beyond the body of the tree just enough to look like the top of a human head protruding. It was instantly riddled by a bullet, and the corporal let it drop, as though the wearer had fallen. He then signed to Audley to do the same, and in another instant the colonel's hat also was pierced by a ball.

"Now they'll come to look for the corpses," whispered the corporal, practiced in this kind of warfare, "and then we'll have fun."

He had scarcely uttered the words when a head was advanced cautiously from behind the trunk of a huge cypress, from which the three shots had been discharged, then a pair of angular shoulders, and finally a long, lank figure emerged, and proceeded cautiously towards the spot where Audley was concealed. The corporal advanced one step from his lurking-place to make sure of his aim; he had leveled his musket, his hand was on the trigger, when a bullet from another quarter whizzed through the air, and the corporal fell with a heavy thud upon the corpse of the sharp-shooter he had just slain, a speedy sacrifice to his manes.

Enraged at the death of his follower, Audley rushed from his hiding-place, and, snatching up the dead bushwhacker's musket, leveled it at the ruffian advancing through the thicket, and shot him dead in his tracks. Another bullet whistled past him at the same instant, but it only grazed his shoulder and buried itself harmlessly in the tree behind which he had been concealed. Audley could not see his foe, but the gleaming of a rifle in the thicket guided his unerring aim, and before the report of his gun had died away he knew, by the crashing and quivering of the canes, that a heavy body had fallen among them.

Not knowing what enemies might be lurking around in the bushes, he stopped, before remounting, to examine his pistols. The precaution was well taken; for he had scarcely drawn the weapon from his belt when a wild yell rent the air, and a troop of nine desperadoes rushed from the thicket. They had heard the noise of the conflict from their lurking-places, and, guessing only too well its meaning, had hurried to the aid of their comrades. Most of them were armed with pikes:

some had only clubs; but, even unarmed, their numbers would have made them more than a match for a single man. Audley saw that his situation was desperate, and resolved to sell his life dear; for to fall alive into the hands of the outlaws would be only to yield himself up to a death of ignominy and torture. The bushwhackers directed their bitterest hatred against the officers opposed to them, and any decoration that betokened military rank was sure to bring dire vengeance upon the wearer. At sight of the three stars that glittered upon Audley's collar, the outlaws gave another yell, and rushed upon him like demons. It was a terrible moment, but Audley's presence of mind never forsook him.

Singling out the only two of the enemy that appeared to have fire-arms, he picked them off before they could level their cumbrous muskets. He was an admirable marksman, and his aim was swift as sure. His third barrel snapped; with the fourth he felled the foremost assailant; the fifth wounded the next man in the leg; the sixth snapped again, and before he could draw his other repeater the pike of a savage brigand was at his breast. The same instant a shot from behind felled the ruffian, the clatter of horses' hoofs rang on the causeway, and the next minute Audley saw himself surrounded by a little band of his own followers. He always kept six or eight picked men near him when on these dangerous expeditions, and his body-guard was not far behind when he and the corporal met with their adventure. The men had heard the noise of firing, and hastened to the scene of action just in time to save their commander's life. The bushwhackers fell back a little before the superior discipline of their assailants, but only for a moment. A reinforcement of seventeen men, all armed with muskets, issued from the swamp at this critical juncture, and the assault was renewed with redoubled fury. Audley's little band fought gallantly, but the odds were fearfully against them, and the nature of the ground—a boggy flat covered with dense thickets—was as unfavorable to the movements of cavalry as it was propitious to the manœuvres of the outlaws. Two of Audley's men were disabled at the first volley by the enemy's bullets, and a third was picked off by a sharp-shooter as he came clattering over the causeway, leaving but three to stand by their leader.

But the damage was dearly atoned for by the assailants. Six of them soon lay stretched upon the ground; and Audley had just drawn his reeking sword from the breast of their boldest, when he himself dropped to the earth, wounded by a bullet in the hips. His three men, seeing their leader fall and supposing him killed, were seized with a panic, and turned and fled as fast as their horses would carry them, leaving Audley alive in the hands of the deserters. One of the fugitives was killed by a rifle-ball as he fled, but the other two escaped and carried the tidings of their leader's death to Major Maelstrom's headquarters.

The victors gave a loud yell of triumph when they saw the wounded officer a prisoner in their hands, and gathered around him like wolves ravenous for their prey. Audley, feeling that escape was hopeless, and knowing only too well the horrible fate that awaited him, attempted to discharge the last load of his repeater in his own breast, but the weapon was snatched rudely from his failing hand.

"Jest wait a bit, mister," said a coarse voice close to his ear, "and we'll send yer to hell without givin' yourself the trouble."

"Yes, wee-ens is a jolly set, and likes to start travelers on their way a dancin'. Yer never tried dancin' on nothin' afore, I reckon, did yer, mister?" said another harsh voice, and the speaker grinned in his face with a grin of savage triumph.

"This here is one o' ther fine officer chaps," cried a third, tearing the decorations from Audley's collar, "and ought to be made to dance the slack-rope for the sake o' his quality. We-ens does things up hunky in these diggin's, mister officer, and we-ens knows what's due to quality folk, if we-ens ain't nothin' but po' trash weselves."

Audley was familiar enough with the horrid jargon of ignorance and crime to know that by dancing the slack-rope was meant the dreadful torture of suspending a man by the neck just high enough for the tips of his toes to touch the ground, and leaving him so until exhausted nature yielded up the ghost.

"Hope yer legs ain't stiff, Cock Robin," cried another of his tormentors, seizing Audley's wounded limb, and giving it such a wrench that he with difficulty suppressed a scream of agony.

"Him ought to dance fust," suggested the first speaker, "bein' as him's a officer man."

"No, let 'em all dance together," cried a stalwart ruffian, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his bloody shirt-sleeve.

"That's the sort o' cotillion I likes to see."

"But we-ens ain't got grape-vine enough to 'commodate more'n two at a time," objected a grimy fellow who gloried in the office of executioner, displaying two coils of rope, at sight of which Audley shuddered in spite of himself. It was not the thought of death that filled him with horror; he had never shrunk from that in field or fort; he had led on many a desperate charge, he had stormed many a bristling rampart and gloried in the peril; but to die thus, to be hanged by a gang of ruffians and left to rot like a beast in the woods, to pass away ingloriously and no tidings of his fate ever reach the outer world, while Ruth—his heart grew sick within him, and his cheek, already blanched by pain and loss of blood, assumed a death-like pallor as a pang sharper than death pierced his inmost soul. One of the outlaws observed his change of color, and whispered to the executioner,—

"Better swing this un fust, Jinks," indicating Audley with his hand, "or un'll slip the noose afore yer gits it over his head."

Jinks regarded Audley a moment with a critical eye.

"No," he answered, gathering up his ropes, "him'll keep better'n t'others; and, besides, him ought to see 'em swing; it might be a pleasure to him, yer know," added Jinks, winking his eye with horrid mirth; "and we-ens loves them officer fellows so much, it 'ud be a pity to spile any pleasure for one on 'em,—ha! ha! ha!"

This sentiment meeting with general approbation, the two of Audley's men who had been wounded were placed upon their horses and led under the low-spreading boughs of a noble live-oak, degraded now to serve the vile purposes of a gibbet. The men were both dreadfully mangled, and one of them so nearly dead already that the agony he endured in being dragged to execution could only draw from him scarcely audible groans and sighs. The other, though a strong, brawny man, fairly shrieked with pain under the hands of his tormentors, as they rudely jostled his mangled and bleeding limbs in heaving him upon the horse's back. Audley, wrung to the heart by the sufferings of his followers, implored for them the mercy he would not ask for himself.

"Do what you will with me," he said, raising his voice in a useless appeal to the ruffians, "but spare those poor fellows. They are not your enemies; they have only obeyed the commands of their officers. We are your real enemies that led them against you. Wreak your vengeance on me, but for the love of God leave those poor wretches to die in peace."

He fell back exhausted, amid the jeers of the brutal miscreants around him.

"Yer needn't be afeered, Mr. Monkey-jack," interposed Jinks, flourishing the halter he was tying in Malvern's face, "you-ens turn'll come soon enough, and yer'll have a good long dance of it, yer will, for we'se a goin' to give yer the slack-rope, my mooney. By golly, ther'll be mellow fruit on that 'ere tree 'bout a week from now; so mellow it'll make the folks that rides along the road yonder wonder whar them swamp-apples come from. The dickens! what are you a hollerin' that way for?" he cried, turning to the poor wounded wretch whose screams were piercing Audley's heart like arrows. "Yer ain't half as bad off as yer thinks yerself; fust thing yer knows yer'll be a dancin' up thar like a 'possum on a gum-stump. It's funny," he continued, with his horrid waggery, "how these 'ere Government chaps does when we-ens catches of 'em. Set 'em on a hoss and they don't go more'n ten steps afore they runs ther heads in a grape-vine," waving his coil of rope with a significant gesture; "and thar they hangs and dances on nothin' till they kills their-selves; pity some folks is so mighty fond o' dancin',—ha! ha! ha!"

The laugh was echoed by the by-standers, for Jinks was the wit of the company, and his *bon-mots* were always received with applause.

Everything being now ready for the ball, as Jinks humorously announced it, two ropes were suspended from a strong bough, whose smaller branches had been hurriedly lopped away, and the horses bearing the two victims were stationed under it till the halters were adjusted, and then led slowly away, leaving their riders dangling in the air. Audley beheld the horrid spectacle a moment, then, exhausted by loss of blood and by intolerable agony of body and mind, fainted away in the arms of the ruffians who had raised him up to force him to witness the death of his followers.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

GEORGE DALTON RECEIVES A TELEGRAPHIC DISPATCH.

The news of Audley's capture and death, which was spread by the two survivors of the fatal fray, carried grief and consternation into the little band, of whose movements he was the real director. Not only was he the ablest man among them, but the only one who could with safety rely upon the fidelity of the uncertain and partially disaffected troops of which the major's little army was composed. Drawn from the lowest and most ignorant class, as the last prop of a cause in which they had no stake, their sympathies naturally enlisted themselves on the side of their own caste rather than on that of the Government which compelled their services; and raw and undisciplined as they were, nothing but the personal influence of their commanders could restrain them from deserting on every opportunity and going over to the enemy. Audley possessed in a remarkable degree the faculty of attaching men warmly to his person; and this not by any laxity of discipline, but rather by that just enforcement of it which gained him the confidence of his inferiors as well as their respect and esteem. They saw that he knew what he was about, and would follow without hesitation wherever he led them, while they obeyed their other officers timidly and with reluctance.

Malvern's death was a terrible blow to the major, who not only valued him as an officer but loved him as a friend. He sent a special messenger to bear the tidings to South Ambury, and wrote a letter to Audley's mother with his own hand, in which there were only seven words misspelt,—an attention which, if it were appreciated according to the labor it cost our worthy friend, could not be esteemed too highly. Upon any other occasion the major's epistle would have excited the satirical mirth of the haughty old lady to whom it was addressed, but the news it conveyed was such as to banish mirth from Mrs. Malvern's heart forever. Audley was dead, dead, dead! that terrible word was all the missive contained for her; and she did not even perceive that *dead* was spelt *dede*, and with a capital D.

It would be vain to attempt to describe the grief of this heart-stricken mother, embittered as it was by the recollections of her last parting from the son who she little thought was leaving her then forever. She called to mind now, in bitterness of spirit, the mildness and forbearance with which, while still adhering firmly to his purpose, he had met her stern refusal to comply with his dearest wishes; and the memory of his touching appeal, "Kiss me once, mother, before I go; we may both be sorry for it some day if you don't," burned fiercer than coals of fire on her head. Tears of regret are bitter enough, heaven knows, but tears of remorse are drops from the burning lake of hell. Oh, that last kiss of hers! that cold, heartless kiss! she would give heaven and earth now to touch those lips again, and to bestow the pledge she had suffered them to implore in vain.

Mrs. Malvern was not a woman to indulge in violent outbursts of any sort, but the anguish that wrung her proud heart for the loss of her only son was more touching in its silent despair than the most frantic demonstrations of grief. For days after the dreadful news arrived she shut herself up in her room, and would suffer no one to come near her but Ruth. Until that time she had treated Audley's affianced bride with haughty reserve, rarely condescending to notice her at all, and then bestowing only such attentions as the barest requirements of civility demanded. But now it seemed like some poor atonement to cherish the woman Audley had loved,—to grant to the dead the prayer she had refused the living.

It was no time for Ruth to think of resenting Mrs. Malvern's former coldness, and the bonds of a common grief drew these two together in a union of sympathy stronger than the ties of blood. Ruth, usually so calm and patient, so unobtrusive of her own sorrows, gave way under the terrible stroke to an utter abandonment of grief, and for a time reason itself seemed in danger of sinking under the intolerable load.

Julia was obliged to restrain her own feelings for the sake of her mother and Ruth; but though she shed few tears and uttered no regrets, it was plain, from her altered, grief-worn face, that she suffered more than either of them, and from a foe more cruel than death.

A great change had come over Julia Malvern since she first dazzled South Ambury society with her brilliant fascinations at Claude Harfleur's ball. She had suddenly grown indifferent to public applause after that night, and took no pains to please. She snubbed all the

women, ridiculed the men, declared her admirers a pack of bores, and speedily got rid of the last one of them. Her triumph was as short-lived as the caprice that urged her to achieve it, and in three weeks' time she was as unpopular as any woman must be who willfully sets all the world at defiance. The brilliant Miss Malvern, who had captivated all hearts on her first appearance, was now universally pronounced a most disagreeable and ungracious person, and the women, as if by magic, all discovered her age at once.

Instead of being disturbed at this general defection, Julia appeared rather to enjoy it. It was not the mere inner consciousness that she could, if she chose to make the effort, bring all this little world to her feet again, in which she took satisfaction, but she seemed to have arrived at a morbid state of feeling that made her actually glory in being hated. She had now been employed for several weeks in a Government clerkship that Major Maelstrom had obtained for her in South Ambury, by means of which she earned a support for her mother and herself. The duties of her position kept her four days of the week in South Ambury; the remaining three she spent with her mother at Sandowne or the White House.

George Dalton all this time was at the Confederate capital, where he had received a staff appointment, pursuing the wildest course of dissipation and debauchery that ever disgraced the son of a gentleman. He was tolerated in society, when he chose to keep sober, on account of the distinguished name he bore, and the extraordinary talents which, when unclouded by his vicious excesses, made him an ornament to any circle; but George seldom cared to avail himself of the toleration, spending his evenings in places and pleasures that had best be unnamed. It was in the midst of one of these wild revels that the telegraphic dispatch informing him of Audley Malvern's death arrived, and made a sober man of him instantly. He set down untasted the cup that he was just raising to his lips, and the bold, beautiful woman at his side shrugged her bare shoulders and stared when she saw his flushed face turn suddenly pale and his hand tremble as he read the message. With a familiarity that betrayed but too plainly what terms they were on, she reached out her jeweled fingers to take the paper from his hand; but George thrust her away with an impatient gesture, and rising from the table hurried out of the room without a word to any one. Entering his own lodging, he locked the door, and, flinging himself upon the bed, sobbed as he had not done since he used to pour out his childish sorrows on his mother's breast. They were honest, manly tears, and let us hope that George was a purer and a better man for having shed them. He did not long indulge his grief, however, but, issuing from his chamber, proceeded at once to the War Department, and applied for leave of absence. It was easily obtained, for the evacuation of the city was already determined upon, and in those days, as of old, when there was no king in Israel, "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Travel was much interrupted at that time, and he did not arrive at South Ambury till nearly two weeks after the news of Audley's death had reached him. What his object was in leaving Richmond he had no definite idea when he set out, but the recovery of Audley's remains presented itself to him, as soon as he was able to think at all, as the first thing to be accomplished.

He remained only one day at Sandowne, and carefully avoided a meeting with Julia, though he omitted no attention to her mother and Ruth. George could be as loving and tender, when his better feelings were awakened, as he was hard and unforgiving when angry, and his visit did more to soothe Mrs. Malvern's grief than anything that had happened since Audley's death. To Ruth, his presence was less soothing at first, for they were both too much overcome to comfort one another. He was startled, when she entered the room, by the change in her appearance. Her face was pale as marble, and had lost much of its roundness; her beautiful golden hair, which she was wont to arrange with so much art, was thrust carelessly back from her forehead, and her plain black dress, wholly destitute of ornament, betrayed that utter oblivion of appearances which does not come to women till some terrible stroke has robbed them of hope forever. Still, she was very beautiful, and the most indifferent observer, beholding her unadorned loveliness, would have justified Audley's choice in preferring her to all the world beside. She was too deeply moved to say much when she found herself alone with Audley's best friend, but, placing her hand in his, stood for several minutes without speaking, while the silent tears trickled unrestrained down her cheeks.

"George," she said, at last, making an effort to calm herself, "you know what I have lost, for you loved him too."

"That I did, God knows," replied George, fervently. "I loved him as a man loves the friend whom he knows will never forsake him. He was a brother to me, and more than a brother. When poor Harry died, I bore it like a man, but now——"

His voice choked, and, resting his head on the mantel, he buried his face in his hands and wept aloud.

"I am a poor comforter, Ruth," he said, recovering himself after a little while, "for I need to be comforted myself. There is one thing, however, I can do, which will be a melancholy satisfaction to us all,—gather up poor Audley's remains and lay them in a Christian grave. I set out to-morrow on my melancholy errand, from which I will not desist till I bring back with me all that is left of my friend."

Ruth pressed his hand in silence. Yet, full as her heart was of her own grief, she could think of others even then, for there was too little of the egotist in Ruth's nature for her to be selfish, even in her sorrow. The signs of violent dissipation in George's face had not escaped her, and called to mind, by a connection she did not stop to analyze, the wild, unhappy look she had often seen on Julia's since the night of Claude Harfleur's ball. The desolation of her own heart made her quick to detect and eager to heal the wounds of others. Oh, if these two wayward spirits could only be brought together again, what misery might they not both be spared! She knew that hearts are softened by grief, and determined to venture on one more effort in Julia's behalf. When she spoke again, it was to say, timidly,—

"Julia will be very grateful for this, George."

"Miss Malvern has no cause whatever for gratitude," replied George, suddenly changing his manner, "since my actions are entirely uninfluenced by any regard for her."

This was unpromising, yet she ventured one more appeal.

"But for *his* sake, George; he loved her so:—you will at least see her before you go, and tell her; that much is due his sister, and it——"

"I will never see her again, as long as I live, on any account!" burst out George, fiercely. "Listen to me, Ruth: if you ever mention that woman's name to me again, from that moment we cease to be friends." His face became livid as he spoke, and Ruth stood aghast at the result of her experiment, as he turned abruptly from her and strode out of the room.

CHAPTER XL.

A GUNPOWDER PLOT.

When George Dalton arrived at Major Maelstrom's headquarters, he found the same confusion and disorder prevailing that had crept into all branches of the public service towards the close of the great civil war. Since Audley Malvern's death the major had undertaken to conduct operations in person, and a system of tactics was inaugurated that would have puzzled any military man living; but the major, having no military education to bother him with rules and precedents, blundered right ahead without regard to consequences, and perhaps, after all, for the irregular warfare in which he was engaged, this was about as good a way of fighting as any other. He certainly pressed matters against the outlaws with considerable vigor, and his men, exasperated at the loss of an officer whom they both loved and admired, engaged in the service with more good will than they had ever shown towards it before.

George penetrated, at considerable risk of sharing his friend's fate, to where the major with a squad of sixty men was scouring the borders of the great Okeefinokee Swamp. His first act, after the usual interchange of courtesies, was to make inquiries about the locality of Audley's disaster and the possibility of recovering his remains. He was informed that the major had himself repaired to the scene of the conflict as soon as the news had reached him, and found the slain of Malvern's troop all lying where they had fallen, but the bodies of the deserters had been removed, and Malvern's along with them; nor had all his efforts, as yet, detected the faintest clue to the disposition that had been made of it. This announcement inspired George at first with a sort of forlorn hope that the report of his friend's death might possibly after all have been premature; but a moment's reflection convinced him of the utter vanity of such a presumption, as he bethought him, with a shudder, of the hor-

rid fate that awaited all who fell alive into the hands of the outlaws. He had now a double motive for pushing his search: to get possession of Audley's remains, and to clear, if possible, the awful doubts that the major's recital had suggested to his mind. The only chance of getting information was, of course, through the outlaws themselves, and he determined, accordingly, that his best course was to remain with the major's party and interrogate prisoners, some of whom might be induced to confess by the promise of pardon.

One dark, drizzly evening, towards the middle of April, as George was returning with four of the major's men from a scouting expedition into one of the wildest tracts of that almost uninhabited waste, they came, at nightfall, upon a solitary hut situated on a narrow neck of land that projected into a vast cypress-brake. The place was so secret, and the cabin so hidden away among the tall canes and palmettoes that hemmed it in on every side, as to be entirely screened from observation, even at a few yards' distance, and George and his men would never have suspected its existence if accident had not conducted them to the very door.

"Thar's one o' the nesses whar the birds we-ens arter rooses," cried one of George's men, springing from his horse, "an' we'll make blazes on it in a jiffy."

They all dismounted a few paces from the door and approached cautiously, so as not to alarm the inmates and give the bushwhackers, if any happened to be harboring there, a chance to escape. The door, fashioned of thin pine planks rudely nailed together, and swung on strips of raw hide for hinges, was closed, but not fastened, the chain used for this purpose being merely thrown around the upright plank that served for a lintel, one end dangling loose against the wall, while the other was held by a staple to the door.

The hovel was a miserable structure, full of cracks and chinks, through which it was easy to obtain a view of the interior. George crept up to one of these and looked in. The spectacle that met his view was much more calculated to inspire compassion than suspicion or alarm. Instead of a party of bristling bushwhackers, the squalid hovel sheltered only two wretched-looking women and a troop of half-starved children. The elder of the two females sat upon a rude hide-bottomed chair,—the only one in the cabin,—holding a weazened baby to her breast, and humming to it in a low, monotonous voice, without removing the inevitable snuff-mop from between her teeth. The other, a sunburnt damsel of some twenty-five or twenty-six years apparently, though probably much younger, when it is considered what havoc want and ill-usage make with women of her class, was squatted in front of the fire, shading her eyes with one hand, while with the other she turned a thin corn hoe-cake on the coals,—the sole provision for their evening meal. The cake looked pitiably thin and small to be divided among so many, and the hungry troop around seemed already devouring it with their eyes. In a corner of the wide clay hearth were crouched two very young children, greedily devouring some stringy potatoes, skins and all, that they fished with a crooked stick from an ash-bank against the jamb; while six others, of various sizes, stood around, watching with eager impatience the progress of the hoe-cake. George's heart sickened within him, and, soldier as he was, he felt at that moment a loathing for war.

"Confound it! I feel as if I ought to be sent to the penitentiary," said George as he turned away, half tempted to mount his horse and gallop off without entering the cabin at all. But he remembered, unfortunately, that the men who accompanied him were under positive and explicit orders to search every cabin they came to, and burn, without fear or favor, every one where anything "contraband" was found, and he, a mere outsider, attached in no official capacity to the major's command, had no right to interfere with his plans, much less to countermand a peremptory order. It would no doubt be a real benefit to these poor creatures to transfer them to "Carroll's family," where they would be well clothed and fed and sheltered; but to benefit people against their will, especially when the work of benevolence is begun by turning them out of their home and burning it before their eyes, was a species of philanthropy not at all to George's taste, and he would gladly have been quit of the whole business. He ordered the two men whom he selected to make the search to knock at the door first, so as not to startle the poor women by bursting upon them suddenly, as was their usual way of proceeding. "And look here, boys," he added, in a very significant tone, "you needn't find anything contraband, you know."

The first thundering rap at the door brought the two women to their feet.

"Is that you, pappy?" demanded the younger one, in a doubting tone.

"No, my beauty, tain't yer pappy this time," answered the foremost of the men, imitating her voice, with the usual coarseness of his class, debased and brutalized besides by the demoralizing influence of war.

"Mind how you talk, sir!" cried George, sternly. "Remember that we are dealing with women, and women who are unprotected; if you dare to insult one of them I'll blow your brains out."

At the sound of strange voices the children crowded around their mother, while the younger woman sprang forward, and, wrapping the loose end of the chain that hung from the door-post about her arm, stood undaunted as Lady Catherine Douglas defending her king in the Abbey at Perth.

"Yer'd better take yer clo'es-wringer outen that 'ere chain, my fairy queen, ef yer don't want to git yer bones broke," said the man outside, forgetful already of George's not very gentle admonition. And he accompanied the words with a thundering blow from the butt of his musket that made the rude portal reel on its hinges.

"You'd better hold that infernal tongue of yours," cried George, clapping a pistol to the man's head, "if you don't want to get your brains knocked out. This rickety hull can be forced without hurting the young woman, and if you harm a hair of her head, your own shall answer for it."

The door, in truth, proved a very small obstacle in their way, for by cutting the strips of hide that served for hinges, access was easily gained without violence to the young woman.

Upon the entrance of the strangers, the children scattered like a flock of partridges to the canebrake, except the two youngest and the oldest, a boy of some ten or twelve years, who paused before taking to flight and glanced at his mother. The woman answered the look with a scarcely perceptible inclination of the head, and hastily told off the fingers of her right hand on the palm of her left, as though she were counting. The boy watched her attentively till she had told off six, then, before any one had time to arrest him, darted through the open door, and sped away to the swamp. The woman sat cowering over the fire, with her baby pressed to her breast, and the other little ones clinging in terror to her knees, while her younger companion stood immovable upon the threshold, with her brown, sunburnt arms folded tight across her breast, glaring at the intruders with wild, defiant eyes, but uttering not a word either of entreaty or invective.

George had remained without, through sheer cowardice, as he confessed to himself, and watched the proceedings of his men through the open door. He had not long to wait the result of their search, for, at their first dive into the heap of dirty rags that served for a bed, they brought out two muskets and a brace of silver-mounted pistols, evidently plundered from some United States officer, for they bore the national monogram elegantly engraved upon the handles. Further search brought to light three kegs of gunpowder, a box of cartridges, an officer's sword, splendidly jeweled, and a Winchester rifle of the finest make.

"Confound the scoundrels, they have gone and found something, after all!" growled George, as he witnessed this discovery, which made it his unwelcome duty to drag a family of helpless women and children from their home and burn it before their eyes. Oh, you whose thoughtless fancy is dazzled with the "pomp and circumstance of glorious war," could your vain imaginations conceive of half the dark, inglorious deeds that are hidden from your ken by the show and the glitter and the shock of battles and the march of mighty hosts, how often would your cheeks tingle with shame for mankind, where now they glow with rapture over his boasted deeds of glory!

There was nothing for it now but to permit the men to proceed with the execution of the unrelenting orders under which they were acting. Feeling more like a detected criminal himself than an officer charged with the punishment of crime, George advanced to the threshold of the cabin, and announced to the women as gently as he could the sentence he had no power to remit, and advised them to get together such of their effects as they desired to carry away with them. He had not the heart to turn them out-of-doors in the night, but determined to keep a watch over the cabin till morning, by which time he hoped a wagon that he dispatched a messenger for would arrive. The women listened to his words in sullen silence, and never budged towards making the preparations he advised.

"I am very sorry you have laid your-

selves open to this severity," pursued George, feeling more and more like a convicted felon at every word, "but you knew the law, and incurred the risk with your eyes open. You have no personal violence to fear, for I give you my word that, come what will, you shall receive the treatment due to you as——"

"Jest what yer'll git yerself, mister," interrupted a rude voice close behind him. and before George could turn round a Herculean blow from the butt of a musket felled him to the ground, and six tall bushwhackers rushed into the room. A desperate struggle now ensued between the outlaws and George's men. Hand to hand and breast to breast, they wrestled in the terrible embraces of hatred till the floor beneath them was dyed with blood. The elder of the two women, dragging her children after her, fled to the swamp, but the younger remained immovable, with her hands folded on her breast, a silent spectator of the fray. The cabin was set on fire during the strife, by a brand hurled by one of the combatants, which lighted on the bed. At last three of the bushwhackers were slain, and the others, finding it useless to cope with the superior strength and equipments of the cavalrymen, took to flight and made for the canebrake, hotly pursued by their enemies. When they were gone the young woman moved for the first time. Lifting the bodies of the dead bushwhackers one by one in her arms, she dragged them by main strength from the burning cabin. Then, taking one of the three kegs of powder that were still lying along with the stolen weapons on the floor, she placed it under George Dalton's head, and, gathering the other two in her arms, hurried away towards the brake, leaving George senseless on the floor, with the cabin in flames around him.

CHAPTER XLI.

RIZPAH.

The course of our narrative must now turn backward a little to trace the adventures of other important persons concerned in it.

While Audley Malvern was lying insensible in the hands of the outlaws, two more of the gang, who had scented the battle from afar, arrived upon the scene. All hands were busy at that moment trying to restore the prisoner to consciousness, lest death should cheat them of their revenge.

The two new-comers stood looking on in silence till signs of returning life appeared, then one of them whispered something to his comrade, and, calling aside a vicious-looking fellow who seemed to be the big man of the crew, a lengthy consultation ensued between them, during which the two new-comers seemed to be arguing some point pretty stoutly with him of the vicious countenance. The man who had started the discussion was no other than our old friend Jim Chance, who had fallen within the last conscription, and fled from his home to escape the enrolling officer. Though Jim hated aristocrats in the abstract, "like pizen," as he expressed it, his bitterness did not extend itself to individuals, and if let alone he would have crawled through life in his own lazy fashion without ever plotting harm to creatures more exalted than ribbits and 'possums. Audley Malvern had been good-natured to Jim on several occasions during his stay at Sandowne, and had once made him a present of some buck-shot and a plug of tobacco. Jim, though he had arrived at the guilty eminence of being accounted a public enemy, was not utterly devoid of gratitude, and it is probable that the discussion with the foreman of the gang grew out of an appeal for Audley's life. However that may be, Jim and his companion failed to come to an agreement with the foreman, who turned away at last, saying, peevishly,—

"Waal, I reckon we better send fur the cap'en to settle the business hissef. He can't be more'n a hour's ride from here by now, and Ben Cullers can git on one o' them derned rebels' horses and fetch him afore you can say 'git out.'"

"The cap'en be hanged!" growled Mr. Jinks, the executioner, who had been an interested listener to the discussion. "He'll be sure to spile the fun ef its lef' to him. He never does want the boys to have a rope dance; don't you remember how he made us shoot them fellers we caught at Old Caney, though everything was ready for stringin' of 'em up? And he'd a let 'em clean off, I b'lieve, ef he hadn' been afeered o' a mutiny. A pretty fix my business 'ud be in ef Cap'en Roby allers had his way."

"He do favor the prisoners mos' too much," put in a third speaker. "He

never has let us have a slack-rope dance sence he come among us ef he knowed it, but he's a bully old boy for all that. We'se took more prisoners and more plunder, and lost fewer men sence he's been our leader nor ever we done before."

"That's so," cried a chorus of voices. "Hurrah for Cap'en Roby!"

It was clear that Roby's star was in the ascendant, so after some further parley the executioner reluctantly laid down his cord, while Ben Cullers mounted the horse from which Audley had fallen and rode rapidly away. In less than two hours he returned accompanied by the captain of the band and two other mounted men. The bushwhackers fell back respectfully before their chief, but without saluting or uncovering themselves. The vicious-looking foreman approached as he dismounted, and addressed him without preliminary ceremony.

"We've had a bit of fun here to-day, cap'en," he began, "and was about to wind up the show with a slack-rope dance, when Jim Chance and Tom Ponder they comes up and will have it that that 'ere prize-cock yonder," pointing over his shoulder to Audley, "is the chap what you charged us about so pertic'lar. It looked like a pity to spile the boys' fun; but you was so partic'lar in chargin' of us not to kill the one what you spoke about, that I thought we'd better wait tell you could come and see for yerself ef this 'un was the right chap. Thar he lies, live enough tu tell his name I reckon, and here's his papers I tuck from his pocket; mebbe they'll tell you more'n he'd like tu hissef."

Saying this, he produced three or four private letters and the little note-book that the reader is already acquainted with,—the only papers Audley had about him at the time,—and gave them to the commander-in-chief. The latter, without glancing at the letters, opened the note-book, and, as he did so, Bruen Harfleur's sketch of Ruth and the pale blonde curl that Claude had restored to Audley so unexpectedly on the night of the ball at the White House slid from between the leaves and fell fluttering to the ground. Why did the bushwhacker's hand tremble as he gathered them up? and why did his rude fingers stroke that silky ringlet so caressingly as he replaced it between the leaves from which it had fallen? Did the sight bring back to his darkened heart the memory of a time when a woman's soft curls had rested on the brawny chest, swept now only by his own shaggy beard? and was his rugged nature touched for a moment with tender pity for the gentle head so soon to be bowed in mourning for a lover? That little tress of golden hair told its own simple story, and pleaded more eloquently for the captive's life than words of poetic fire. There was moisture in the bushwhacker's eyes as he closed the book and thrust Ruth's picture hastily out of sight, as though he dared not gaze upon it. He then proceeded to the spot where Malvern lay stretched upon the ground; and, as he bent over to see his face, the captive opened his eyes, and, with a start, the two men recognized each other, for this outlaw chief was no other than the prisoner whom Audley's interposition had rescued from death on the day of the tournament. The young man roused himself an instant from the stupor in which he had lain since his fainting-fit, and made a feeble effort to clutch the stranger's hand. He was fast lapsing into a state of delirium from the fever caused by his wound, and his mind could form no connected train of thought; but the sight of this wanderer, associated so vaguely and mysteriously with Ruth's history, recalled his wandering faculties for a moment to a recollection of the mysterious part he seemed to play in that strange drama.

"The ring! the ring! tell me," he muttered, clinging with his failing hand to the bushwhacker's arm and fixing his eyes with a wild, feverish stare upon his face; "tell me for her sake, tell me," he repeated; but the words he wanted would not come, and the question died away in incoherent mutterings about the girl he loved. He felt himself drifting hopelessly away into the chaos of delirium; he knew there was something he wanted to say, something he must say, but, like one oppressed with nightmare, the utterance he strove so hard for stuck in his throat, and the speech he would frame broke from his lips in unintelligible jargon. By and by even that consciousness forsook him; he loosened his grasp of the outlaw's arm, and wandered away into wild delirious ravings, during which Ruth's name was constantly on his lips. The bushwhacker listened with a softened countenance, and there was something of almost womanly tenderness in the touch of his great brown hands as he raised the young man's head gently from the damp earth and placed his own jacket under it for a pillow. Then he turned to his men:

"You were right, boys," he said; "this is the young officer I wanted you to save.

He saved me onst when I was in a worser scrape nor he's in now, and you all know, though Dick Roby ain't nothin' but a cussed outlaw, he ain't the man to forget a favor. But, come," he added, "we'd better make off from these parts, or the blood-hounds 'll be on us afore we knows it."

Some of the men looked a little sullen at being cheated of their revenge, but Roby's influence was paramount, and they all obeyed without a word. The bodies of their fallen comrades were carried a few rods into the swamp and buried there in the slime, while the carcasses of their enemies were left a prey to birds of the air and beasts of the field. Audley was placed upon a rude litter, hastily constructed out of the branches of trees, and borne away on the shoulders of four sinewy bushwhackers. For two or three weeks all was a blank to him. The inflammation resulting from his painful, but not necessarily fatal wound, together with the intense mental excitement that followed it, had brought on a violent fever, attended with constant delirium, during which he was totally insensible to all that was passing around him.

When consciousness began to return, he found himself on a coarse but clean bed in a small hut, very roughly but strongly built of stout unhewn logs, and fortified outside, as he could see through the chinks around his bed, by a stockade of upright poles driven into the ground. There was no window in the cabin, and the position of his bed did not admit of his getting a glimpse through the door; but it was evident, from the croaking of frogs and the mournful notes of night-birds that filled the air as soon as the sun went down, that it was situated in or near some extensive swamp. He was too weak and faint at first to take much notice of things around him, or to think much about his situation. He was attended day and night by a negro boy, whose name he had somehow got it into his head was Grigg; though whether he had really heard somebody call him so, or had only dreamed it, he could not tell. Sometimes, especially at night, he would hear a confused hum of voices and shuffling of feet outside, as though men were passing hurriedly hither and thither; but only two persons, besides the negro, ever entered the cabin.

One of these was a young woman, who came every morning to bring some preparation that she had cooked for the invalid. Audley heard her called Nan Hackett by the men outside the hut, and, though she seldom came near his bed, he could see that she was a tall, raw-boned lass, like the "cracker" girls he had seen in "Carroll's family," with bare, brown feet, hands hardened by toil, and a face not beautiful to look upon, but with something so fierce and wild about it, so different from the cowed and spiritless look habitual to her class, as to give it the interest of novelty. As Audley's convalescence progressed, Nan ceased to visit the cabin at all, and his food was prepared by Grigg in a little iron stewpan before the light-wood blaze that burned on his hearth all day, but was carefully extinguished at night.

The other person that entered the hut was a man, who felt the invalid's pulse regularly night and morning, and questioned Grigg anxiously concerning him. His voice was so low that Audley caught but few of his words, and the light in the cabin was so dim, even at mid-day, and his own perceptions at first so uncertain, that he could only form a vague conjecture as to who the visitor was. When he had recovered his faculties somewhat, he questioned his negro attendant closely about this mysterious person, and heard from him a marvelous story about Cap'en Roby, with two other men, having found him in a cave when he was a runaway, and assisting him to escape from his master. Grigg said the cap'en and the two men had "runned away" from Andersonville, and that they had been living among the deserters, in the hope of escaping to the Yankees. "The other men wasn't nothin' but po' white trash," said Grigg, "but Roby hissef was a rale genleman, though he did try to make folks b'lieve he warn't nothin' but old po' buckrah." How Grigg made this discovery he could not tell, but he "jes' knowed it, 'cause he knowed it;" and this was all Audley could get out of him.

It happened one evening, as Grigg was preparing his patient's supper, a sort of broth made of rice boiled with the flesh of wild-fowl, that a great tramping and rushing to and fro was heard on a sudden outside the cabin, mingled with the hum of voices in excited consultation, as though some startling intelligence had drawn large numbers of the bushwhackers to their rendezvous. Unable himself to move a step without assistance, Audley sent Grigg to the door to see what was going on; but the negro was turned back at the threshold by the outlaw chief, who at that moment strode into the room, followed by

six stout bushwhackers, all armed to the teeth.

"I am sorry to disturb you, colonel," said the chief, addressing Audley in a respectful tone, "but I hope you are not too weak to stand a bit of a journey, for we shall have to take you traveling to-night."

This was all the explanation vouchsafed the prisoner, and as Audley was in no condition to make resistance he yielded himself passively into the hands of the armed ruffians, by whom he was placed on a rude litter and borne out into the open air.

In the mean time the cabin was hastily dismantled, all traces of occupancy being carefully removed, the door stove in, and the chimney pulled down, to give it the appearance of having been long deserted. Roby superintended all these arrangements in person, and issued his orders with a promptness and decision that showed him to be perfectly at home in such emergencies. His rude followers yielded him implicit obedience, and Audley could not help admiring the penetration and sagacity evinced in all the operations of this wild marauder.

In less than an hour all their preparations were complete, and the outlawed band set out upon its nocturnal march. The night was very dark, the sky being overcast with low, leaden clouds, from which a drizzly rain was falling, so that Audley could not tell how many men were in the party, but he judged, from the tramping of their feet and the length of time they took in filing past him,—for his litter brought up the rear of the troop,—that there were over a hundred of the rogues on foot, besides a small party of horse led by Roby, that went ahead to scour the country. It was evident, from the haste they made and the vigilance with which they looked about them, that the movement was not a foray, but a flight, and a very precipitate one at that.

Their route was confined to the wildest and most unfrequented regions, now picking their way through dismal swamps, whose oozy sod scarce yielded footing to the most cautious step, now winding through trackless forests of pine, with no guide save some wandering cattle-trail, and the instincts of their own gipsy natures. They carefully avoided every open highway, and when their route from one desert waste to another lay across any of the paths of civilized man, they never ventured upon the transit till after a careful reconnoissance, both up and down the road. They marched in the most profound silence, no sound issuing from their ranks save the measured tramp of the men as they wound their way among the pines, like a procession of silent ghosts speeding on some direful errand from another world. The melancholy music of the pines was broken now and then by the hooting of the great owl, scared from her perch by this midnight invasion of her solitary kingdom, while on the borders of fens and marshes the lonely note of the whip-poor-will mingled with the weird chorus of ten thousand frogs. The bearers of Audley's litter were changed every half-hour at a signal from Roby, without a word spoken; and the chief rode up to his side frequently during the night, as if inspecting carefully the arrangements for his comfort, but forbore any remark to the prisoner. As Audley was as comfortable as circumstances would permit, and as he was in a state that compelled him to utter passivity, he remained as silent as his bearers, betraying neither anxiety nor curiosity as to their movements.

Towards daybreak the bushwhackers slackened their pace somewhat, and seemed to breathe more freely, as if they considered their worst danger, whatever it was, over. They began to carry on scraps of conversation along the line, and Audley heard one of his weary bearers say to another, with a long sigh of relief,—

"We must be nigh the place by this time, Dan."

"Yes," replied Dan, echoing the sigh, "thar's the Muckohatchee Swamp right ahead, and tain't more'n four mile across 'long here."

They now plunged into a densely overgrown and very boggy lowland, with a creek running through the centre, which they had to ascend for some distance before they could find a practicable ford. The track seemed a familiar one to the bushwhackers, for they followed without difficulty the part where the footing was firmest, and seemed to know exactly the spot where the creek could best be forded; yet, with all their experience, so great were the difficulties of the way that they were more than two hours in crossing the swamp, and the sickly dawn had struggled through the clouds when they reached its outer edge. As they emerged upon an open space a thin blue smoke that went curling up from behind a wall of cane and palmetto, a little farther on,

attracted their attention and seemed to diffuse universal satisfaction.

"Thar's the house!" cried a chorus of delighted voices; "we'll be at it in no time."

"Jingo! and Nan's got her fire up for a bully breakfast," replied the foremost litter-bearer.

"Bully for her!" cried his right-hand companion. "Nan Hackett's a gal as is a gal."

With sundry other compliments to Nan and her "*cuisine*," the tired troop pressed eagerly forward; and scrambling through the canebrake to the neck of dry land beyond, saw before them the smoking ruins of the cabin that George Dalton's men had burned the night before.

A young woman was sitting dejectedly beside the ruins, with three corpses at her feet, like Rizpah of old, suffering "neither the birds of the air to rest upon them by day, nor the beasts of the field by night." Her feet were bare, and her scanty clothing, drenched with moisture, was tattered and burnt in many places, exposing her sunbrowned arms and shoulders to the damp breezes of the swamp; but her thoughts were intent only upon the cold, stark figures at her feet; and she heeded neither wind nor sky, nor the chilling mist that penetrated to her very bones. Her hair was wet with the dew of heaven, and fell in coarse, disheveled masses over her temples and bosom, concealing her features from view, till a sudden rustling among the canes, as her countrymen forced their way through the brake, caused her to turn her head,—and Audley recognized at a glance the wild, restless eyes of the girl who had carried him his broth in the early days of his convalescence. Poor Nan had dragged from the burning hovel, whose embers were still smoking beside her, the bloody remains of her father, her brother, and her sister's husband. Rude, unpolished boors they were, unversed in all those little arts by which men of gentler blood soothe and brighten the lives of women,—and sometimes, alas, deceive and betray them as well. They were ill-favored and unlovely to look upon, these kinsmen of Nan Hackett; their manners were coarse and brutal; they had often beaten and ill-used her; and if the heart doled out its affection by rule and by measure, small reason had Nan to weep for their death. But they were her own flesh and blood, her comrades in the hard battle poor Nan had had with life; and though they often made her battle the harder, still, she had never known anything better: they were hers, all she had; and no wonder, then, that her cheeks were haggard and her eyes wild, as she sat keeping her solitary watch in the misty, morning twilight.

Roby's band uttered a yell of rage and despair as this melancholy spectacle burst upon their view. They readily divined the meaning of the picture. Their last refuge had been set upon and destroyed by Government scouts; and the squad they had sent to prepare it for their reception, and to spy out the land before them, had all been slain or made prisoners; not even a woman or child had escaped to warn them of the disaster,—George's men, in their hot pursuit, having captured all save Nan, who lay hid in the thicket till the glare of the burning hut had faded from the midnight sky.

Some of the men approached Nan and began to question her, while others gathered round Audley, with menacing looks, threatening to sacrifice him in retaliation for their slaughtered comrades, and even Roby's influence seemed likely to prove of no avail to divert them from their purpose. While they were thus engaged, an ominous tramping of horses was heard in the distance. The outlaws pricked up their ears and listened. The sound was approaching rapidly, and Roby gave the signal for his men to retreat into the swamp; but before it could be obeyed a troop of fifty horsemen dashed across the little isthmus and came charging into their midst,—not a ragged, rebel troop of limping invalids and unfledged boys, but a smart, sleek, well-ordered company of Yankees, perfectly mounted and equipped, and all glorious in fresh blue uniforms and shining brass buttons, with a spick and span new star-spangled banner flying over their heads. Strangest of all, this loyal band was led by a dashing rebel officer, in full Confederate uniform, and that officer was George Dalton!

CHAPTER XLII.

A DESCENT INTO HELL.

When Nan Hackett had disposed George Dalton's head as we have seen with a keg of powder for a pillow, she retired a safe distance within the swamp to wait until the explosion should be over. But Nan was never destined to enjoy her

revenge, for the little gunpowder-plot she had prepared so dexterously came to naught as unexpectedly as the nefarious schemes of Guy Fawkes.

The blow George received had only thoroughly stunned him, and, though leaving him apparently lifeless, the hurt in itself was by no means fatal, or even serious. Nan, in moving his head, had caused him partially to recover sensibility, though in a very faint and imperfect degree. He had no power to move a muscle, and though painfully conscious by this time of the conflagration raging around him, the severe scorching he began to experience only suggested to his fancy weird and horrible dreams, without awakening the capacity to escape. He thought he had been killed in the fray, of which some vague impression still lingered in his mind, and that he had waked up at last in the region of fire and brimstone, which he had so often heard described as the eternal abode of the damned. The awful hallucination was not dispelled at finding himself the sole occupant of a place to which the orthodox tell us the bulk of the human family has been hastening for six thousand years. Still, he was surprised at finding hell so silent and deserted, and could not help wondering where the deuce all the other wicked fellows had gone, nor, I blush to record it, could he quite repel a feeling of disappointment at meeting none of his acquaintance, many of whom he thought were quite as promising candidates for devilship as himself.

While he lay turning these things over in his mind, and wondering if he were the only damned soul in hell after all, there arose all at once such a terrible clatter that he thought Old Nick himself must be coming in state, and suddenly a number of devils presented themselves to his view. Curiously enough, all these devils had on the Yankee uniform. There must have been a battle in the world above, he thought, and the slain were arriving in a body at their destination. It was comforting, at any rate, to find that only the Yankees were sent to hell. But what right, by Jove! had Old Nick to be claiming him in that category? He wouldn't stand it, by George! He owed the old rascal a grudge anyway for that scorching, and now to be insulted on top of it was more than a well-bred devil could stand.

But, strange to say, the climate of the infernal regions seemed to improve as soon as these blue devils appeared. He felt himself cooling off most agreeably as they laid their hands upon him. Very soon the flames disappeared, and in another moment he felt the cooling drops that Dives had prayed for in vain trickling gratefully over his forehead. He next became conscious that he was lying on the ground, with his head on somebody's knee; he felt the night-wind fan his cheek, he saw, by the flare of the burning cabin, the friendly pines waving above his head, and recognized, with a bounding heart, that he was still in the world of living men. He then lay for some time with his eyes closed, while his mind returned to a full consciousness of all that had just happened to him. At last, quite restored to his senses, he opened his eyes again, and turned them, with no small curiosity, to the face of the person on whose knee his head was resting. In doing so he recognized a Yankee officer, several years his junior, whom he had known as a lieutenant in the old service. He raised himself instantly, pressed his hand to his forehead as if collecting his senses, and then the whole truth flashed upon him.

George was the first to speak, for the Yankee, knowing the intense bitterness that rankled in Southern hearts at that time, felt a delicacy in obtruding himself upon George's notice.

"Come, Schuyler, give us your hand," he said, frankly offering his own. "The last time we met, I believe, was at Chancellorsville, where we were both doing our best to kill each other; but I see that, like a generous fellow, you are quite as ready to save an enemy as to destroy him."

"And much more so, Dalton, in the case of an enemy like you, if you will persist in calling yourself one," replied Schuyler, cordially grasping the hand George had extended to him. "I would rather have captured you just when I did than a whole regiment of your rebels. But come, tell me, old fellow, how the deuce you came to be in such a plight, and with this villainous thing under your head, too," placing his foot on Nan's keg of powder, which his men had removed from the cabin. "'Tisn't exactly the pillow a fellow would choose of his own accord, especially for such a warm bed as we found you in. There seems to have been a bit of a shindy, too," pointing to the corpses Nan had dragged from the cabin, "and the fun was rather overpowering for some of the company."

George explained, briefly, the circumstances attending the destruction of the cabin, and then he spoke of Malvern's death, and the reasons which had induced him to engage in this wild, uncivilized warfare. The Yankee expressed much concern, for he had known Malvern in the old service, and remembered the wondering admiration with which all the young lieutenants used to look up to "the handsomest officer in the army."

Having accounted for himself, George next proceeded to question the Yankee as to his appearance in a quarter so remote from the enemy's line of operations; "That is," he added, "if I am not asking for information that would be contraband."

"No, I guess not," replied Schuyler, "as I am on an errand somewhat similar to your own, and shouldn't wonder if I was in search of the very same rascals. Some of the natives here fell upon the rear of one of our baggage-trains, murdered several of the men, and plundered their camp, carrying off all their horses, arms and ammunition, together with a lot of things belonging to officers of the division, among which was a splendidly jeweled sword of General Bagpipe's, who, you know, is in command at——"

"My head on it," exclaimed George, "that was the toy I unearthed in the cabin yonder, along with a lot of other plunder. I can't tell what became of it in the fray, but if it was old Bagpipe's, I wish, with all my heart, it was run through his body."

"Some of his own men wouldn't be sorry if you had your wish," said Schuyler, laughing; "but my business at present is to recover old Bag's plaything, if I can, and not to run it through his body. I have been sent out with one hundred men to hunt up these rascals and give them a lesson that will make them more cautious in future. Some of my scouts scented a nest of them day before yesterday in a swamp not far from here. I sent a detachment this morning to capture it, but have not heard the result yet. Let's see, I think from what you tell me we are on the right trail; you say there were arms found in the hut?"

"Plenty of them, and much better than they would be likely to capture from any of us poor devils of Southerners."

"Did you notice what make?"

"Not particularly, but they looked too new and well ordered for rebel arms."

The Yankee stooped down and examined the powder-keg. "Fleming & Arago," he said, reading the label on the head. "They are the chief contractors for supplying the United States Government with gunpowder. It's plain we are on the right scent. See here, Dalton; as you are familiar with the country round here, and we are both after the same game, suppose you join forces with me for a day or so. You can help me in finding my way through these infernal marshes, and I may be able to further the object of your search. The war is over, anyway, so you needn't scruple to come under the old flag once more, and fight side by side, instead of face to face, with your old comrades."

This was rather a startling proposition to a Confederate, who was naturally not quite so ready as his Yankee interlocutor to admit that the struggle was over; but the plan seemed a good one, and George, after balancing a moment between his hatred of the old flag and his anxiety to learn more about Audley, determined to adopt Schuyler's suggestion.

"My forces, at present, consist of a single man," he replied; "as my half a dozen vagabonds seem to have taken themselves off without ceremony. I'll go along with you, however, and do what I can to aid you capture these rogues, though I little thought that we should ever pull together in the same harness again, Schuyler, after I kicked out of the old traces."

Matters being thus settled, Schuyler mounted George on his own horse and conducted him to the spot where he had ordered his camp to be pitched, some three or four miles from the scene of the fray, and refreshed him with a very comfortable night's bivouac.

In the mean time, George's vagabonds having cooled their ardor by killing one of the flying bushwhackers and capturing the other two, together with the nine children and their mother, bethought themselves at length of their commander. They returned to the cabin to look for him, and finding it nothing but a heap of smouldering ruins, concluded that he had perished, and hurried off with their prisoners to report the tidings at headquarters.

At daybreak next morning Schuyler and Dalton set out on their expedition, directing their course first towards the scene of the past night's adventure, as the point where they might with most reason expect to find some traces of the enemy. What success they met with the reader already knows, in part.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD.

THE outlaws made no attempt at resistance when Schuyler's troop rushed upon them, but, after the first paralyzed pause of surprise and alarm, fled pell-mell into the swamp. Nan Hackett and the chief alone remained immovable beside the litter on which Audley Malvern was stretched.

A discharge from the assailants' guns killed several of the fugitives and wounded others before they could gain the shelter of the canebrake. Among the latter fell Roby, pierced with a fatal bullet, at Malvern's feet. The desperadoes had never been quite reconciled to Roby's leniency in sparing the prisoner, and one of them, in his mad fury against civilized man, took advantage of the leader's fall to aim a bullet at the invalid's heart as he hurried past him in his flight. The ball would inevitably have proved fatal but for the interference of Nan Hackett, who clapped her hand resolutely over the muzzle of the gun, and received the bullet in her palm. The girl's hand was fearfully mangled, but no one in the excitement of the moment perceived that she was hurt. Nan was used to neglect, so she quietly wrapped her bleeding fingers in a corner of her ragged apron and resumed her station by the prisoner's bed. She uttered no word of complaint, she showed no sign of pain, but, if any one had taken the trouble to notice her then, he might have seen just a shade of bitterness pass over her face as she fixed her eyes unheeded upon the man whose life she had saved.

As for Audley, he was unconscious alike of the bullet that had sought his life and the hand that interposed to save it; but one thought filled his mind now: Roby was dying, and with him might perish all hope of clearing the mystery that hung over Ruth's life. As soon as he saw the bushwhacker fall, that nameless suspicion which had so long hovered unacknowledged in his mind suddenly took definite shape, and impressed itself upon him with horrible distinctness. Rising from his pallet with unnatural strength, he threw himself upon the wounded man, and, grasping his collar as though he would drag him by main force back to life, put his lips close to his ear, and demanded, almost fiercely,—

"Tell me before you die, tell me, are you her father?"

The horrible thought was put into words at last, and Audley fairly gasped as he uttered them.

Roby slowly removed the young officer's hands from his throat,—for, though nearer death, his strength was as yet less wasted than Audley's,—and, holding them both in his own for a moment, he looked him steadily in the face while he demanded in his turn,—

"Tell me, young man, before I die, tell me, do you love my daughter?"

Audley reeled backward, and would have fallen to the earth but that the dying man held his hands so tight. Here, then, was confirmation of the vague dread that had been growing upon him stronger and stronger every day, though he had never dared to own it to himself. The woman he had chosen for his wife was sprung from a creature like this,—a robber, a vagabond, a—heaven knows what; and there was something in her face, beautiful as it was, that plainly confessed the fatherhood. It seemed like unwarrantable presumption in such as he to bear any relationship to one so pure and sacred in Audley's eyes, and he felt as if he could kill the wretch for daring to be Ruth's father, but his heart never once swerved in its allegiance to her.

"Yes," he answered, snatching his hands from Roby's grasp. "Yes, I do love her, and I will make her my wife, though the devil himself should rise up and claim to be her father."

Roby smiled. "It is not quite so bad as that," he said, "and I don't think in the end you will have any cause to regret your choice, though I dare say I don't look like a very desirable father-in-law just now; but I shall soon be out of the way, and you will see, when you hear what I have to say, that my daughter might easily have been worse fathered. I had not intended to reveal what I am going to tell you so soon. I had intended to wait until I could fully unveil the hellish plot that has deprived my child of her birthright, that has stamped her mother with shame and her father with infamy, till I could make good in the eyes of all the world her right to a name that no man need be ashamed to link with his own, and restore her to the rank and fortune that are justly her own. I knew that you loved her before I asked you, and had determined if I found you worthy, as I believed you were, to resign her to your keeping, when I had fully established her rights and could offer her as a bride that the proudest might be

proud to claim; but the task has fallen from my hands, and I must rely upon you to accomplish what I have only begun. I can but tell you my story before I die, and give the proofs into your hands; then it will be for you to conquer justice for your wife. The service will be more acceptable coming from you than from a father whom she has never known. She saw me twice, but she would have shuddered to know that I was her father."

His voice faltered, and he pressed his hand to the gaping wound in his side as though in pain. Audley drew his handkerchief from his pocket, and, as he bent over the dying man to stanch his blood, narrowly escaped being trampled underfoot by a horseman who came charging upon the heels of the flying bushwhackers. The dragoon reined in his steed with a sudden ejaculation, and, springing to the ground, fairly lifted Audley from the earth in the ecstasy of his joy.

The horseman was George Dalton. It has taken much longer to describe the events just narrated than they occupied in passing: the instant that elapsed between the discharge that felled Roby and the rush of the pursuers upon their prey having more than sufficed for the hurried words that passed between Audley Malvern and the dying outlaw. The entire combat did not occupy more than a minute or two, the bushwhackers, fasting, dispirited, and wearied with their long nocturnal march, yielding almost without a struggle. They had not even the strength to fly; and before George had recovered from his surprise and delight at finding his friend the greater part of them had surrendered; and Schuyler, having given orders for the disposal of his prisoners, turned to look after his rebel ally. He was greatly surprised at beholding Malvern, but there was no time for explanation then. Roby's pulse was failing fast, and Audley's thoughts were so occupied with him that he did not even stop to question how Schuyler and his Yankees came to be there.

"George," he said, in a solemn whisper, when the first surprise of their meeting was over, "this man is dying, and he is Ruth's father!"

George uttered an exclamation more vehement than his first upon discovering Audley. Here were two men risen as it were from the dead,—what would come next?

Something that startled them all enough when they heard it.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

The dying man scanned the newcomers narrowly for a moment, and then requested them to sit down beside him.

"I am glad you are here, gentlemen," he said, in a tone so out of keeping with the ruffianly garb he wore that the young men stared at each other in surprise, "for I am going to tell a story that may have to be sworn to some day in a court of justice, and it will be well for Colonel Malvern to have creditable witnesses, should he ever have to go to law. Please listen, gentlemen, if you have patience, and attend well to what I am about to say." Then fixing his eyes upon George, he added, "I think I see before me a son of Judge Dalton?"

George nodded assent.

"Then you have probably heard of me before. My name is Mortimer Seabury."

Again George nodded assent.

"You have heard of me," continued Seabury, to whom we must now give his true name, "as a bigamist, a felon, a murderer, a deceiver and betrayer of the woman who loved me,—all which I pronounce a slander and a lie, and with my dying breath I charge Julian Harfleur as the author of the hellish plot that tore me from my lawful wife and cast a stigma of shame on the birth of my child."

He raised himself partially as he spoke, and shook his clinched fist in the energy of his passion; but the violence of the motion proved too much for his failing strength, and he sank back to the earth in a fainting condition. When he revived, his voice was feebler, but his mind as clear as before.

"I must not waste my breath in vain invectives now," he said, "for my time is short, and I have much to say before I go. Come nearer, Colonel Malvern, so that if my voice begins to fail you may catch the last whisper, for if you love my daughter, every word I am going to speak will be of vital interest to you. Raise my head a little, and give me some water; I want to last long enough to tell my story, if I can."

They did as he requested, mingling brandy with the water, and stanched as well as they could the stream of blood that issued from his side. The stimulant seemed beneficial, for his voice was stronger when he resumed.

"Have you ever heard," he inquired, addressing himself to Audley, "of a wealthy family named Southmate who once lived on the estate adjoining Sandowne? One of their old servants, named Chloe, still lives there, supported by Mr. Bruen's generosity."

Audley replied that he had heard something of the family in connection with the old servant in question, and her remarkable fidelity to it.

"I am a descendant of that same house," continued Seabury. "They all squandered their money and went to the dogs long before I was born, and one of the daughters scandalized society by taking to the stage for a living. This was Ruth Southmate, my mother. She was a great beauty and a superb musician, and created considerable excitement in some of the capitals of Europe. My father, then an idle young man of fashion, the son of a respectable English country gentleman, became deeply enamored of her, and, as she was too virtuous to be approached in any other way, made her an offer of marriage. His father was furious, and threatened to disinherit the young man if his attentions to the actress did not cease immediately. My mother was too generous a woman to permit her lover to sacrifice himself for her sake, and, though far from regarding him with indifference, tried every means to cause him to desist from his suit; but in vain. He followed her all over Europe, and in answer to her remonstrances had a magnificent gem, that had been an heir-loom in his family for generations, set in a ring with a reference to the answer her scriptural namesake had given Naomi engraved on the rim, and this he flung to her one night in Vienna, when she had sung with great *éclat*. You have seen the same on my daughter's hand.

"He was as good as his word, and never desisted from 'following after her' till she had consented to marry him. My grandfather was as good as his word, too, for he immediately disinherited my father, and settled his estate, which was not entailed, upon his second son, an exemplary young man who never got into scrapes with actresses.

"My father, who, like most heirs presumptive to large fortunes, had been reared with extravagant tastes and no business habits, soon ran through with the little his wife had saved from her earnings and then died, leaving her a handsome young widow with one child,—the vagabond you see before you. She had many offers, and finally disposed of herself to a rich India merchant, on condition that he would educate her boy and give him a start in life. She died when I was about sixteen, but my step-father, an honorable, kind-hearted old gentleman, whom I have every reason to remember with gratitude and affection, kept his promise to her faithfully. After completing my course at the University of Oxford, I was sent, at my own desire, to try my fortune in the New World, my mother having early inspired me with her own predilections for her native country. Mr. Mulford — this was my step-father's name—had some influence with the ministry then in power, and obtained for me an under-secretaryship in the British Legation at Washington. There I met Nettie Bruen, and had the audacity to raise my eyes to the belle and star of the republican court, with what result you all know. She was a glorious woman, Nettie was: neither fortune nor flattery could spoil her, and ambition, that foul ulcer in most women's hearts, never ate away the noble instincts of hers.

"It is needless to tell how her family opposed her choice of the poor under-secretary, how her father did his best to marry her to a cold-blooded rival, and how she remained true to her own heart through it all, and could neither be scared nor coaxed into forsaking me,—poor Nettie!"

His voice trembled and his eyes grew dim with tears as he uttered the name, but he brushed them quickly away and resumed his story.

"She was spirited as well as true, and her father was at length obliged to consent to our union, for she told him plainly that if he did not, she would marry me without his permission. Perhaps I was wrong to take advantage of her affection, but I loved her, and I did it; and, may God forgive me, if I were to live my life over, I'd do the same again.

"It is useless to tell how my father-in-law and I quarreled. He was arrogant, I unforbearing, and suffice it to say that one day he used such language to me that I could no longer, without sacrificing my self-respect, maintain any connection with him; so I resolved to break off at once completely and forever. I was always of a roving, adventurous disposition, and determined to seek my fortune anew in the then almost unexplored region of the Far West. Nettie made no remonstrance; she would have followed me to the ends of the earth, but she was

not just then in a situation to stand the fatigue of a long journey or the hardships of pioneer life, so I consented to leave her behind till her child should be born, and then, when I had prepared her a home on the Pacific, I was to return and carry her with me. But before the home was ready came the news, the false news, as I now know it to have been, that has blasted my whole life. A letter in the handwriting of Nettie's father, and signed with his name, informed me that my wife had died in giving birth to an infant which had survived the mother but a few hours. The letter was very curt, and couched in language which intimated plainly enough the writer's desire that this should be the end of all communication between us, and of course I never troubled him, even with an answer to his letter. I received at the same time a copy of the South Ambury 'Pioneer' announcing my wife's death, with appropriate obituary notices; and also my mother's ring, which I had given her with the injunction never to part with it, was returned to me.

"I had now, unfortunately, no motive for revisiting Nettie's native home. It would have been unpleasant to come in contact with her family and painful to revive old associations, so I remained in the West a year or two, leading a restless, unsettled, miserable life, and then returned to England, which I left again in a few months for the Far East, to overlook some business connected with my step-father's house. I remained in India for twelve years, and conducted Mr. Mulford's affairs so much to his satisfaction that, having no children of his own, he left me, when he died, the bulk of his fortune, some five hundred thousand pounds sterling. This property, considerably augmented, is still in my possession, and will be my daughter's portion when she marries. I am gratified," he continued, fixing his eyes upon Malvern, with a bright smile, "to know that it is not to be the prey of a designing fortune-hunter, but the merited reward of a man who has shown himself capable of a noble and disinterested affection."

Audley remembered a certain little episode that had preceded his declaration to Ruth that made the praises of his prospective father-law seem like a satire. He felt decidedly "sneaky," as the schoolboys say, and for a moment was half inclined to regret that he was to marry an heiress after all, though it is but fair to add he soon got over that folly.

"All business relating to my property," continued Seabury, "can easily be settled by reference to my lawyers, How & Pringle, 162 Chancery Lane, London, and the necessary papers will be found in a trunk I have left at Mr. Stockdale's warehouse in South Ambury, to be delivered to the order of Richard Brown. You see," he added, with a feeble laugh, "I have as many aliases as if I really were the vagabond I appear.

"And now, let me explain how I came to seem what you see me, for there we touch the main thing I have to reveal. Wet my lips again and stop that flow of blood from my side if you can. I am growing weaker very fast, but I must live long enough to finish my story; I must do justice to my child before I die."

They complied with his request, and he resumed,—

"After coming into possession of my fortune, I wandered about over Europe and the East, as restless and unhappy as ever; and when I had exhausted the Old World, seeking rest and finding none, I turned to the wilds of the New. I traveled over the greater part of South America, then wandered on to the West Indies, andfrom there, about six months ago, crossed over to New Orleans. The famous cantatrice Sonata arrived there about the same time, and I, of course, went to hear her. Judge of my feelings, when the prima-donna stepped upon the stage, at beholding a woman so like my wife that my heart stood still as though I had seen her spirit. Not only were form and feature the same, but every movement was my wife's, and that peculiar carriage of the head, like the Venus of Milo, recalled Nettie so vividly that I seemed to have lost my senses. I was awakened from this semi-stupor by the first notes that fell from the songstress's lips, and lo! a new marvel: it was as if my mother's voice had sounded from the grave. The notes were stronger,—clearer, if possible, even more silvery and bell-like, but yet so much the same, that I could fancy it was my mother's voice after she had been glorified into one of the angelic choir.

"When the first song was ended, the whole audience joined in a burst of rapturous applause, and I, moved by an impulse I could not explain nor yet resist. tore from my finger the ring that had been my mother's and flung it at her feet. I saw her pick it up and smilingly place it on her own finger, and was con-

tent. It had been my mother's betrothal ring, and my wife's, and ought to have been a sacred relic to me, yet the hand of that stranger seemed, I knew not why, the fittest place for it. May it never be removed from her finger till she bids some brave son of her own place it on the hand of his bride!

"The rest of the performance was all a dream to me. I think the piece was 'La Fille du Régiment.' I heard the people applauding, I saw the actors moving about upon the stage, but it was all in some far-off, fairy country; in all that crowded house there was but one real figure to me.

"At the close of the opera, I rushed behind the scenes with the crowd that went to offer their felicitations to the triumphant queen of song. I felt myself, somehow, irresistibly drawn towards this beautiful actress, and I could not let her go out of my sight till I had spoken to her, till I had asked her who and what she was. On reaching the green-room, however, I found that she had stolen away without a word to any one; and then a rumor began to spread that this glorious songstress was not Sonata at all, but an unknown musician from the city who had been secretly engaged to take her place, the real Sonata being confined to her bed by a sudden illness. I made inquiries in every direction, but my utmost importunity could only elicit that any attempt to discover the lady would be fruitless, as she was to leave the city that very night, by flag of truce, for some point within the Confederate lines, nobody knew where. Drawn along by an immutable destiny, I prepared immediately for departure, and set out to follow her next day. I would have gone that very night but for the difficulty of procuring a passport, which delayed me several hours. Being an experienced traveler, I soon came upon the trail of the songstress, and followed secretly, but never addressed her, nor even learned her name till at a little station by the way I, with a strange thrill, heard you address her as Miss Harfleur."

He fixed his eyes upon Audley as he spoke, and the young man then recognized for the first time in the dying bushwhacker the man whose conduct had attracted his notice when he met Ruth for the second time at Mill Creek Junction.

"You are startled, I see," said Seabury, noting the expression of his face, "but nothing to what I was when those words fell from your lips. Harfleur was the name of a man who had tried to stand between me and Nettie, a man whom I had always distrusted, and to whom she herself felt an invincible repugnance, but whom it was her father's most ardent desire that she should wed. It was startling that one so like my wife should bear his name; and while I was asking myself if this could be a mere chance I heard her tell you, in that tone so like my mother's, that she was on her way to South Ambury, near which her family resided,—and the very spot where Nettie's family and the man named Harfleur had always lived. The mystery was deepening. I followed to South Ambury; you saw me on the journey, but little guessed my object.

"On account of the old quarrel with my wife's family, I determined not to make myself known. It had been so long since I was in the country that there was not much danger of my being recognized, but the better to secure my *incognito*,—which I had no idea then of carrying to the point I have been compelled by circumstances to do,—I made some changes in my dress before appearing on the streets of South Ambury, and assumed the speech and manners of your 'crackers,' with which I had become familiar during my former residence in the country. I inherit a talent for acting from my mother, and have often amused myself in my wanderings by personating different characters, thus bringing myself into relation with all classes of people, and even now I was half pleased with the fun of my experiment, little dreaming what a serious matter my acting would become before I was done with it.

"The first person I accosted was a fellow named Jim Chance, whom I remembered as a hanger-on of the Bruens in former days. If he is among your prisoners, captain," turning to Schuyler, "I beg that you will not let any harm come to the poor devil; he ain't worth the powder it would take to kill him, and the miserable boon of a starveling existence like his is little enough reward for the assistance he unconsciously rendered me in unveiling a damnable conspiracy."

Schuyler, who had become deeply interested in the dying man's history, promised that not a hair of Jim's valuable head should be harmed; and we may as well state here, once and for all, that that useful member of society was soon restored to the bosom of his family, and dismiss him forever from these pages.

"Almost the first words Jim Chance dropped," continued Seabury, turning again towards Audley, to whom his narrative was mainly addressed, "was a passing allusion to the death of my wife, as having occurred just fifteen years ago, —eight years after the time at which I had been apprised of it. I could hardly believe my ears. I questioned him over and over again, thinking he must be mistaken in his dates, but he stood to his figures so persistently that I was forced to regard the matter as worthy of further investigation. I had in my pocket-book the slip cut from the newspaper that had been sent me announcing Nettie's death, and my first act was to seek for a paper of the same date among the old files at the 'Reporter' office and compare the two. While turning over the dusty sheets, picture my amazement at finding, in a number four years later than the one I had received with the notice of my wife's death, an announcement of the marriage of Antoinette, daughter of Randolph Bruen, to Julian Harfleur!

"Continuing my search, I came at last to a paper of the same date as my slip, and found it to contain nothing whatever in regard to Nettie. I then remembered that Julian Harfleur was editor of the South Ambury newspaper in those days, and the thought occurred to me that he might have had one copy printed unlike the rest, to serve a special purpose.

"It was clear to me now that I had been the victim of a diabolical conspiracy. There was the ring I had given Nettie to keep forever sent back to me long before she died; there was her father's letter in his own hand, conveying to me a lie blacker than Satan himself ever begot,—yet it was hard, even in the face of all these things, to believe that that letter was not a forgery. Randolph Bruen was an arrogant, overbearing man, but it was hard to reconcile a baseness like that with my knowledge of his character; and then, that Nettie should have been a party to such wickedness! Oh, my God! how could I believe that!"

"Do not believe it," whispered Audley, deeply moved. "That letter was a forgery; and as for your wife, she was herself deceived and imposed upon. They persuaded her that you were dead, and would have made her believe that you were false and wicked besides, but she was true to you, and loved you to the end, and died of a broken heart at last, because they forced her to marry your rival."

"Yes, yes; I learned all that afterwards," said the dying man, eagerly. "In my secret prowlings around her old home I heard it all; how I had been defamed and artfully confounded with a notorious desperado who, among his many aliases, had once happened to light upon the name of Seabury. I heard of poor Nettie's faithful, broken heart; of my banished and abandoned child. May God forgive the men who could so harden their hearts against their own flesh and blood! I would never have believed it in the nature of George and Randolph Bruen to do the like of this, and it must have been a subtle fiend that tempted them to it."

"You do those gentlemen injustice," said Audley. "They were not tempted, but deceived; they were victims of the plot like yourself—not accomplices. Sorrow and shame hurried Randolph Bruen to the grave; and his open-hearted, unsuspecting brother has been blinded and imposed upon all his life by Julian Harfleur."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Seabury, with a brightening countenance.

"Perfectly sure."

"Then I can die with a lighter heart. George Bruen was my friend in days gone by, and he was always a frank, generous, noble fellow,—it went hard with me to believe him capable of treachery. Julian Harfleur was an able villain to accomplish all this alone."

"He had an accomplice," said Audley, recalling his interview with the pious Æneas, "but not among your wife's kindred. Did you ever hear the name of Tadpole?"

"Yes; a canting, whining, sanctified devil,—Nehemiah Tadpole. He was a classmate of Harfleur's at Cambridge, and was engaged, on his recommendation, to teach the youth of South Ambury."

"And he was also employed by Mr. Bruen, upon Julian Harfleur's recommendation, as his confidential agent in investigating the reports concerningy our character and end; and to his pious hands your innocent child was consigned, after her mother's death, to be murdered by ill-treatment. He has a worthy son called Æneas, who has been crammed with Mr. Harfleur's family secrets, and sent all the way from Boston to levy blackmail upon him. By the light of your revelation I am enabled to interpret many things that only filled me with doubt and perplexity before. I see through the whole mystery at last, and the feeble glimmerings I had have now become a

perpect blaze of light, revealing all the windings of this labyrinth of fraud and guilt,—but don't let me interrupt; go on with your story.

"There is little more to tell," answered Seabury, in a voice so feeble that they feared lest he should not be able to finish. "I wandered about the neighborhood a few days, in disguise, picking up all the information I could get, and one day was almost tempted into betraying myself to Ruth, when I chanced to meet her alone at her mother's grave. Poor child! she was terribly frightened when she saw me rise up from among the tombs, where I had hid myself on hearing her enter the church-yard; but I could not resist the impulse that prompted me once more to look my daughter in the face; and that look unnerved me so, that if it had not been for my dread of seeing her sicken with horror at the sight of such a father, I would have told her all.

"One person had my secret from the first, and kept it faithfully,—old Chloe, my grandfather's slave, and my mother's nurse. It was under her roof that I oftenest found shelter during my secret prowlings. The old creature had been warmly attached to me during my short residence in the country, more than twenty years before, and she recognized me again at a glance, in spite of the changes of time and my villainous disguise. It is too late now for me to reward her fidelity; but I charge you, with my dying breath, to remember her when I am gone.

"The eye of hate is as keen as the eye of love, and Julian Harfleur, too, knew me the moment his glance rested upon me. He was the only person, besides the old negro, that ever recognized me spontaneously. It was on a festal occasion; he singled me out among a crowd, and in that look he devoted me to destruction. You know all that, for you were there, and your eloquence saved my life, when his insidious malice would have turned the violence of the mob he raised against me. I felt that it would be useless to denounce him then, believing, as I did, that Nettie's family were in the conspiracy with him; and what would the word of a vagabond like me avail against honorable gentlemen like George Bruen and Julian Harfleur? I had no means at hand of proving my identity, and of course it would not suit their purpose to acknowledge it. I realized, as soon as I detected the conspiracy, that in concealment lay my only safety while I remained in a neighborhood where there were so many interested in getting rid of me. The discovery I had made being totally unexpected, I was not provided with many important proofs I could produce bearing upon my cause, nor had I competent witnesses at hand. It was my intention to collect all the information I could get, then to slip out of the country as silently as I had slipped into it, apply to the British minister at Washington for passports and protection, take the necessary measures for establishing my identity, and then, when all my plans were perfected, to return as speedily as possible and unveil the villainous fraud. I believed that there would be a powerful combination against me, and meant to take powerful measures to defeat it.

"But all my plans were overthrown when Julian Harfleur's evil eye rested upon me, and I was suddenly taken at a disadvantage, and unawares, with no chance at all of making good my cause before the violent and prejudiced mob who were to be my judges. Still, I was not going to die tamely, without an effort to vindicate the right,—my right and my child's. I held my peace till the last moment, if perchance the necessity of pleading my cause against such odds might be spared me; but I was not going to die silent, and was just preparing to open my lips when George Bruen, like the brave, honest man that he always was, stood up and dared to speak for justice and mercy, though he little knew in whose behalf he was pleading. Then you came, with your soldierly speech, and saved me. You know the rest. On being ordered to Andersonville, I obtained permission to write to General Brockenborough, with whom I had formed an intimacy in some of my wanderings, and requested him to procure my release; but before a reply could reach me I found an opportunity of making my escape, and seized it. It was my intention then to make my way to the Yankee lines, thence to Washington, secure the protection of our minister there, and then carry out my original plan; but I found, on account of the bad company into which I had fallen, that it would be hard to get myself received in a respectable capacity anywhere. When I reflected, too, that Julian Harfleur, now fully sensible of his danger, had my daughter still in his power,—when I remembered what a dark, unscrupulous man he was, it seemed too long to wait. I tried once to surrender myself to you. Do you re-

member that evening when I met you on the hillside with the nineteen brave men whom you refused to receive? I was eager then to tell you everything, and implore your assistance, but was foiled, —foiled as I have been at every turn in this maze of wickedness; and lastly, to ruin all, some of my scoundrels went depredating upon the Yankee outposts, and brought them upon my heels, too, and here I am, dying, with my task half done,—dying, without having ever embraced my child. I bequeath the work of justification to your hands. You will find a small pocket-book with papers on my person. There are others in my trunk at South Ambury, and for the rest, you must consult with my attorney in London. Bury me by Nettie's side, and tell Ruth—tell my—child, that——"

He threw up his hands with a sudden convulsive quiver, the last words died away in a long gasp, and he never spoke again.

CHAPTER XLV.

GEORGE DALTON HARDENS HIS HEART.

It was on Easter-Sunday that the news of George Dalton's death was brought to South Ambury. There was a delicate perfume of wild azaleas pervading the little Gothic church that stood at the entrance of the town, and the soft vernal breezes played around the flower-laden altar, wafting its sweet incense over the heads of the kneeling congregation. Their bishop, an exile from his own home, was in the chancel. He had just pronounced the Declaration of Absolution, and the penitents were still kneeling with heads reverently bowed, when a messenger entered the church, and, advancing on tip-toe down the aisle, paused at Mr. Stockdale's pew and handed him a folded slip of paper. The cotton-factor rose from his knees, crept noiselessly out of the sacred building, and, mounting his horse, hurried away to Sandowne, the bearer of tidings that were destined to change the Easter cheer of that stricken household into more than Lenten sadness.

It was a custom for all the neighborhood to meet at Sandowne on Easter-Sunday for a grand dinner-party. Mr. Bruen's Easter-dinner was as much a part of his religion as the Nicene Creed or the Apostolic Succession, but out of regard for Audley Malvern's friends the usual festivities were omitted on the present occasion, and the inmates of the White House were merely sent for to dine *en famille* at Sandowne.

Julia was standing behind Mr. Bruen's chair when the cotton-factor arrived, and read over his shoulder the slip of manuscript which the latter placed in his hand. She betrayed no sign of emotion, her color did not change, her hand did not tremble, as she passed the missive silently from the old gentleman to Ruth, upon whom, by the tacit consent of all, seemed to devolve the task of breaking the news to George's mother. Ruth felt almost angry with Julia for the strange want of feeling she displayed, but if she could have seen her that night, when no eye but God's was upon her, wearing out the long watches in anguish and in tears,—if she could have seen her pacing wildly up and down her solitary chamber, wringing her hands and tearing her hair in a perfect frenzy of misery and despair, she would have felt that the heart alone knoweth its own bitterness.

Julia had forfeited the right to weep for George before the world, but in the loneliness of night, when only the stars of heaven and the pitying angels were there to see, she poured out the bitterness of her soul in a torrent of grief that was fast exhausting the forces of her nature. At the end of one short week she was so changed that her best friend would never have recognized her. Her cheeks were hollow and sunken, while her wasted features made her eyes seem fearfully large and bright, like those of a maniac. She seemed to have grown ten years older in as many days, and even in her beautiful flaxen hair scattered threads of silver began to show themselves. She never mentioned George's name, she never confessed her suffering, but Ruth divined her secret, and she felt at last, when she gazed on Julia's wrecked and ruined beauty, that there were depths of human bitterness which her own heart had never probed.

Deep as was Ruth's distress for her own lover, sharp as was her grief for the friend who was dear to her as a brother, it was unembittered by the horror of remorse; she had not, like Julia, the burden of a soul's destruction on her conscience. She realized what an awful thing it was for George to be summoned so suddenly in the midst of his headlong career before that awful tribunal from which there is no appeal; but even in

this terrible thought her religion afforded her a sweet source of consolation, in that prayer for the dead which is one of the most beautiful and comforting doctrines of the faith she professed. Julia had not even the ordinary aids to resignation and submission that every form of Christianity, even the sternest and most barren, can bestow. She gave her adherence to the faith of the family just as she did to its social or its political creed, and believed in it just as she did in the Malvern pedigree or the institution of slavery,—because she had been taught to do so.

With Ruth, on the contrary, religion was almost a passion. All that she had ever known of good centred in the Church, and the sacred memories of her childhood all clustered round the altar as those of other people around their firesides. The only light that dawned upon her life's desolate morning had streamed from the altar; the only home that opened its doors to her was the convent; the only mother she had known, the Church. The unhappy experiences of her childhood may have rendered her somewhat intolerant of other creeds than her own; but perhaps after all a little sprinkling of fanaticism or enthusiasm, whatever you choose to call it, — for fanaticism is merely an excess of enthusiasm,—is essential, if not to the life, at least to the warmth and vigor of religion. It is better to believe too much than too little, to be too hot than too cold; and your fanatics and enthusiasts, if not the wisest and most agreeable Christians, are certainly the most earnest and devout. Strong convictions are necessarily accompanied with some degree of intolerance, and a broad liberality is very apt to proceed from either doubt or indifference. In this age of daring inquiry and pitiless deduction, the man is to be envied who can have implicit faith in anything; who can cherish even an honest error, and believe in it, and fight for it, and die for it, undisturbed by the demon of doubt that has destroyed the peace of so many hearts. Yes, faith in anything, even in a dream, is better than this black gulf of doubt and uncertainty towards which the human mind seems inevitably drifting. Faith is the one thing better than love that God has given to mortals, and until faith is lost no heart can be utterly desolate and miserable. Ruth possessed this treasure, this pearl of great price; and, though she, too, had lost all that earth held dear for her, yet was she richer than Julia by all that heaven contains.

As soon as the bishop heard the dreadful news about George Dalton, he hastened to offer what consolation he could to the afflicted family. A warm personal friendship had always existed between him and old George Bruen, notwithstanding the startling diversity in their characters, and Mrs. Dalton was a near relation of his own.

Never was there a man so honored by people of all creeds, and so ardently loved by his own, as that good old bishop. With a majesty of person that would have struck awe into kings, that holy, apostolic man united a suavity and gentleness that drew the most timid to his side. Possessed of talents and attainments that made him the peer of the greatest and wisest of earth, he knew how to adapt himself to the unlearned and ignorant as well, and in the same breath could make exalted sinners tremble and lowly ones weep. Heir by birthright to a proud name and lofty station in life, courted, flattered, sought after by the great, yet, like the Master he served, he did not scorn to be called the friend of publicans and sinners. That imposing majesty of person, which in another man would have overawed you by its grandeur, was softened in him by an exquisite tenderness of manner that lured even little children to play about his knees as about a beloved grandfather.

The bishop spent a week at Sandowne, and was to officiate on Sunday at the family chapel of St. Mary's. Julia was not fond of church-going as a general thing, but she felt within her now a need of something that she knew not where to find, and some hidden instinct told her the bishop was the man to point the way to what she wanted. Julia was not a person to be reached by humble means; and if a simple parish priest had stood in the bishop's place and brought her the self-same message from heaven, his words, it is to be feared, would have fallen upon her ear unheeded. Her haughty nature, even in its ruin, could be impressed only by what was lofty and imposing, and there was something about the very looks of the grand old bishop that seemed to declare him the ambassador of heaven. There are some natures that seem to require the aid of an august ritual and grand symbolism to keep alive within them that faith which is the evidence of things not seen, and their devotion would starve on the meagre fare that simpler souls find all-sufficient for their needs. Julia's love of pomp and splendor extended itself even to the accessories of

her religion. She had little regard for "the day of small things," and it seemed as if heaven, in pity for her very weakness, had sent her in her hour of need the only messenger whose voice she would be likely to heed.

If the bishop had framed his sermon that Sunday with especial reference to Julia, it could not have suited her case more exactly, with the advantage of lacking the personality that an expressly-framed discourse is almost sure to have. His text was from the fifty-fifth Psalm: "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest."

Julia listened attentively, and kept her face closely veiled, that no one might see the copious tears stealing down her cheeks. At the close of the last prayer, she rose reluctantly, cast a wistful look towards the altar, wavered an instant, then turned and followed the retreating footsteps of those who, like herself, felt unworthy to pick up even the crumbs that fell from the Master's table.

After service, the bishop accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Bruen to the White House, where they were all to dine. Being an old man, the exertion of preaching was fatiguing to him, and he retired to his chamber awhile before dinner to refresh himself; but he had scarcely closed the door, when a nervous rap was heard outside, and, upon his invitation to come in, Julia Malvern entered the room. The bishop was surprised, but received her with a pleasant smile.

"Come, my daughter," he repeated, seeing her waver on the threshold; and, advancing to meet her, he caught her by both hands, in his kind, fatherly way, and placed her on a chair at his side. Though Julia was a comparative stranger, there was something about her that excited his interest, and he felt a desire to know her more intimately.

"And now," he continued, when they were seated, "tell me all about it, for I see by your face that something lies heavy on your heart. What do you want with your old bishop?"

"I want many things," cried Julia, feeling all reserve melt away before the irresistible charm of his manner; "I want counsel and help and consolation; I want everything that wisdom and goodness can give to one blind and wretched and guilty. Oh, George! George! it was I that blasted and ruined his life! it was I that gave the rein to his vices and sent him unprepared into eternity."

At the mention of George's name the good bishop heaved an involuntary sigh. None knew better than he the noble capabilities of the young man's nature, and none deplored more deeply the wreck he had made of them. He had christened George when a baby; he had been the playmate of his father in boyhood; and, even without these claims upon his friendship, George Dalton was a man whom no one that knew him could ever regard with indifference. Julia's words awakened a train of sad reflections in the old bishop's mind, and he murmured, as if speaking to himself,—

"Poor George! it is a fearful thing for a human soul to be called so suddenly into the presence of its Maker."

The words of the bishop pierced like an arrow into Julia's soul, and wrung from her an involuntary cry. The burden of her anguish had at last become too great for her to bear; and in proportion to the rigidity of the restraint which she had imposed upon her feelings was the violence of the outburst, when at last they passed beyond her control. She had no longer any command over herself; and the grief and remorse that had preyed on her heart so long in secret broke forth all at once in a wild burst of sobs and self-accusation. Flinging herself at the bishop's feet and clasping his knees, she frantically echoed his words,—

"Fearful to be called so suddenly! yes, fearful! but to me, not to him! not to him! It was I that made him what he was; let all his sins rest upon my head. Oh, say, good bishop, that the vengeance of heaven will fall upon me, not upon him! I loved him, and would gladly give my own soul to save him. Ask your God to take me, and leave him alone, if I am not unworthy even to perish in his stead."

The bishop was shocked at her words.

"My daughter," he said, in a gentle but reproving voice, "you take too much upon you in charging yourself with the condemnation of a soul. I know not what wrong you may have committed towards the dead, but judgment belongeth to God alone; and all that you can do now is to trust in his goodness and pray that he will have mercy on your soul and give you peace."

"Peace!" she cried, wildly; "there will never be peace for me again; but say, oh, say, that there is eternal mercy for him! He was so noble, so generous, so good, until he knew me; my cursed ambition has ruined all. He lavished upon me all the love of his great and noble nature,

and I returned him only the falsehood and selfishness of mine. He was so loyal, so true, so confiding in his affection; I so mean, so selfish, so worldly in mine. I gave up love for ambition, happiness for pride, a noble heart for corruptible gold; and here I am in my turn forsaken by pride, humbled and wretched, and barren of every joy. It would not matter for me; I deserve no better; but when I wrecked his happiness I ruined his soul and wrecked him for all eternity. He told me so the last time we ever met; his last words to me were words of bitter reproach,—curses that have never been recalled;—and now he has gone forever, gone, I know not where, and his curse still rests upon my head. And yet, oh, George!" raising her eyes to heaven and speaking like one in a delirium, "I have loved you always; loved you! oh, you will never know how well! and will love you to the end, though you meet me with curses before the judgment-seat of God!"

The bishop saw that she was hardly accountable for what she said. He raised her gently from the floor, and, replacing her on the chair from which she had slidden, proceeded to give such words of counsel and comfort as she needed. It was beautiful to see the stately old man, whose presence would have added grandeur to an assembly of kings, lending himself with the simplicity of a woman to the task of comforting a heart-broken girl who had lost her lover.

"None of us can say, my child," he answered, "how the mercy of God may deal with sinners; and we can always trust in his goodness. No one can tell what change may have come over George at the last; and the words you deplore so bitterly may have been recalled with his dying breath. But after all, you must remember, my daughter, that whatever wrong we may have committed against our fellow-creatures always involves another and a greater wrong against him who has said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' George Dalton has gone where tears and remorse are alike unavailing; but there is another whose heart is always open to the cry of the penitent, and it is only in making peace with your God that you can hope for peace to your soul."

He led her on gently to think and speak of higher themes than Julia's darkened soul had ever dwelt upon before, and when she left him the seed was sown in her heart, though she knew it not, that was destined soon to blossom into life and give to her character the only grace it needed,—the grace without which all others are barren and void.

There is a stage of misery that shrinks from human gaze as stealthily as guilt itself, and Julia felt on leaving the bishop's presence that she could not bear the light of any human eye. She stole quietly out into the garden, and creeping along where the shrubbery was the thickest, she started at finding herself all at once in the bower where she and George had held their stormy interview on the night of the ball. She hardly knew what impelled her to go there. It was the first time she had visited the spot since that night, and all the painful associations of the place came rushing upon her with such overwhelming force that for a moment her strength almost failed her, and she leaned against the trellis-work of the arbor for support. With what bitterness every word spoken in that last interview now came to her mind no language can express. If the opportunity she had wasted then could be renewed, what a different use would she make of it! How gladly now would she throw herself at his feet, and return him words of love for his bitterest reproaches! How gladly would she humble herself in the dust before him, and meet his anger with prayers and entreaties instead of fierce defiance! As these melancholy reflections took possession of her mind, the wild tumult of her thoughts broke forth into speech, and, stretching her hands towards heaven, she cried,—

"Oh, George! if in that unknown region to which you are gone the dead have any knowledge of the world they have left, or any care for its concerns; if you can look down and see my repentance, my remorse, my agony of soul; if you can look into my heart and see its desolation, send some token from the spirit-land to show that you accept the miserable atonement of tears and anguish I have to offer. If a spirit can be moved by earthly love, self-betrayed and smothered long, yet unconquerable and indestructible, alas, as the worm that never dies; if a spirit can be moved by nights of weeping and days of pain, send some token that you know my heart at last, if but to rejoice in its bitterness."

As she ceased speaking, a slight rustling among the foliage that shaded the entrance of the bower caused her to turn her eyes in that direction; a figure emerged from the clustering boughs, and

George Dalton stood before her. For one moment Julia turned ghastly pale, and stood paralyzed like one in a trance, then, without stopping to inquire how George came there, — without asking whether it were really George himself, or only a cruel phantom of her own excited fancy,—she rushed suddenly forward, and flung herself in the dust at his feet.

"George! George!" she cried, clinging to his knees, and raising her eyes with a piteous look to his face, "whether this be you, miraculously restored from the grave, or a spirit sent from the other world in answer to my prayer, look down with pity and see me humbled in the dust at your feet,—see my repentance, my humiliation, my love; for, oh! George, I have always loved you, and for every pang I ever inflicted upon you I have suffered tenfold myself. I do not ask for your love again,—I know I have deserved to forfeit that forever,—but for the love of heaven take back those cruel words you spoke to me when we last stood here together!—give me one kind look, speak one word of comfort, or I die!"

George wavered a moment, as if swayed by conflicting impulses, and a convulsive movement passed over his features, then, slowly disengaging himself from her clasp, he said, coldly,—

"I am the bearer of tidings which will doubtless be of the greatest comfort to you, Miss Malvern: your brother is safe."

Was it possible that the announcement of Audley's safety could have brought her so little gratification? George's manner of telling the news had killed all the joy of it. She was no unfeeling monster, who viewed her brother's fate with indifference, but her heart was swayed at that moment by a passion more powerful than sisterly love, and her first words, on hearing the good tidings, would have wounded Audley to the quick if he had heard them. Rising slowly from the ground, she said, sorrowfully, while two big tears rolled down her cheeks,—

"And is this all you have to say to me, George? Can you not speak one word—give me one look even—of kindness? Must you always be so hard and unforgiving to one whose greatest sorrow is that she cannot cease to love you, even if she tries? Oh, George, I know I am saying what no woman should say to a man; I know I am exposing myself to shame and humiliation in your sight, but I do not shrink from them before you. It is but just that you should scorn and reject me in your turn. I owe you some atonement for the wrong I have done, and if my anguish can add sweetness to your revenge, then know that your hardness causes me suffering more fearful than my treachery ever inflicted on you. There, all the bitterness of my heart is laid bare; rejoice in it if you will,—I cannot call you cruel;—it is but just."

She turned away her face to hide the tears she could not restrain. A softened expression came over George's features, and his tone was less forbidding when he spoke again.

"Julia," he said, and she started at hearing him call her by name, "it would have been well for both of us if you had listened to the dictates of your own heart sooner, but it would be worse than folly now. I have been the slave of evil passions too long ever to mend. The excitement of the vicious indulgences in which I used to try to drown my feelings has now become necessary to me, and it would be a baseness, unworthy even the beast that I am, to suffer any virtuous woman to link her fate with mine. Harshly as I have sometimes judged you, I am much too bad for even you to be my wife."

"No, George," she cried, suddenly facing him and resting a hand on each of his shoulders. "Never too bad for me, never! if you were a felon in his cell; never, if you were stained with all the crimes of the decalogue! it should still be the dearest labor of these hands to beckon you from the mire into which they had plunged you."

George smiled a bitter smile. "It would be a labor beyond your strength, Julia," he said, disengaging her hands gently and putting her from him. "You have not seen the felon in his cell, the libertine in his orgies, the swine in his mire. If I were your husband and my vices were every day laid bare before your eyes, you would soon learn to loathe and detest me. No, no; if I valued your love, the best thing I could do for myself now would be to keep out of your sight. You think you could endure me as you see me at this moment, but what would you do if I should come staggering into your presence some day the drunken brute that you once called me?"

"I would love you all the same," she answered, in a low voice, taking no notice of the bitter allusion his words contained. "Oh, George! you may wound and break my heart if you will, but can never turn it from you."

George wavered an instant, then started

towards her with outstretched arms, but only to clasp the empty air. She had humbled herself enough, and she felt that she could say no more. Her womanly pride asserted itself again, and she turned hastily away as she uttered those last words, and had vanished among the shrubbery before George knew what she was about. He stood a moment irresolute, looking regretfully at the spot from which Julia had just disappeared, then folding his arms moodily on his breast, he said to himself,—

"Perhaps it is better so; nothing but misery could come now of a union between us two." And, turning on his heel, he hurried out of the arbor by the opposite entrance from which Julia had made her exit.

CHAPTER XLVI.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

Julia did not go immediately to seek her brother after leaving George in the garden. She felt so humbled and wretched that she could not all at once open her heart to the joy of Audley's restoration; and to meet him with a cloud on her brow after such a separation, that would never do. She lingered about among the shrubbery for some time longer, in order to calm her agitation, and then proceeded towards the house, where she found everything in commotion on account of the extraordinary arrival that had just taken place. Not only were the two so bitterly wept as dead thus suddenly restored to their friends, but they had come singularly attended; and Julia was surprised, as she approached the front door, to see a group of United States officers making themselves at home, and peacefully smoking their cigars on the piazza. A strange young woman, with fierce, wild eyes, and her left hand bound up in a handkerchief, came out of the house as Julia entered, took up a little bag, containing all her worldly goods, that had been deposited just outside the door, then disappeared again, following the lead of the disdainful Cleopatra to the back regions of the establishment. A burly negro fellow, whom the reader will recognize at a glance as our old friend Grigg, sleek and well-dressed, but wearing a most rueful expression of countenance, stuck like a leech behind one of the Union officers' chairs, to the evident discomposure of the patriot's olfactories, though he could not forsake his principles so far as to request his brother man to keep at a more convenient distance.

Poor Grigg, though surrounded by the authors of his freedom, retained such a vivid recollection of that night under the packing-screw, and still held such exaggerated notions of "Mass' Julian's" omnipotence, that he was in danger of losing faith in the Stars and Stripes, and betrayed unmistakable symptoms, if left to himself, of forgetting his new-born dignity of freeman and yielding ignominiously to the old runaway instincts of the slave,—that being the only remedy known to Grigg's experience against apprehended ills.

Scarcely observing these things, Julia pushed on in search of her brother, whom she found reclining on a sofa in her mother's room, pale and exhausted by long illness and the fatigues of his recent journey. The joy of the occasion was too deep to admit of many words. Ruth and Mrs. Malvern stood aside an instant for the brother and sister to embrace, then they all sat down by the couch of the invalid, Ruth resuming her station at the head, as by common consent the first place was yielded to her. Nobody cared to speak; nobody could express in words the unutterable emotions of that hour. Audley lay for some time in a kind of delicious trance, only raising his hand now and then to touch the soft fingers that were stroking his hair, or opening his eyes at intervals to gaze into the fair young face bending so tenderly over him.

After several minutes of this delicious repose, Audley was the first to break silence. Fixing his eyes steadfastly on each of them in turn, he exclaimed all at once, as they rested on his sister,—

"Good heavens, Julia, what is the matter with you? You haven't been breaking your heart about anybody, have you?" he added, in a whisper, drawing her face down close to his own; "because," he continued, caressingly, as she rested her head for a moment on the pillow beside him, "there is not a rascal on the face of the earth worth what I read in your face."

"I have been very wretched, Audley," she answered, returning his caress; "but it's all over now; all over," she repeated, absently, and smiled one of those ghastly smiles under which misery so often seeks

to hide itself. Audley said no more. He knew the proud reserve of Julia's nature, and would not wound her by pursuing a theme on which she chose to be silent; but her altered appearance shocked and distressed him so that his eyes frequently wandered from Ruth's face to his sister's. Grief had not made the same havoc with Ruth's beauty as with Julia's, but seemed rather to have added to it a soft, romantic charm. Its traces were plainly legible in the paleness of her countenance, and a certain touching melancholy that seemed too deeply impressed upon her features to vanish all at once, even in that moment of restored happiness; but there were no signs of that wild and stormy passion, that grief driven almost to madness, that sorrow which has no hope, that stared in Julia's hollow eyes and sunken cheeks.

Next to the woman he had chosen for his wife Audley loved his sister better than anything else in the world, and the sight of her altered features disturbed his peace of mind. He almost forgot for the moment how far Julia had been the author of her own wretchedness, and felt as if he would like to break George's head for him; but not having that satisfaction within reach just then, he made an effort to divert his thoughts from Julia by talking about something else.

"And so you have had George and me both dead and buried, have you?" he began, after a pause. "Well, I don't wonder at the report, for we have passed through adventures that ought, in all reason, to have made an end of us. There was a time, Ruth, when I little thought ever to look upon your face again. Move around a little, so that I can see you better. There!" gazing at her fondly; "you have been getting more beautiful every day. What an irresistible little widow you would make!"

"Hush!" cried Ruth, with a shudder, placing her hands over his lips; "the subject is too horrible for jesting, Audley. I was a widow, in all but the name, till you came back."

Audley caught the little hand that rested on his lips and pressed it tight in his own.

"I have something to tell you, Ruth, by and by, that will astonish you very much," he said, regarding her with a mysterious smile.

"Nothing can astonish us, my son," replied his mother, "since you have been so miraculously restored; but come, you have not told us yet how it all happened."

Audley was not more averse to discoursing of his own adventures than other men, and was soon engaged in relating them to his three eager hearers, carefully avoiding, however, any allusion to Seabury and his disclosures, which he preferred communicating first to Ruth privately.

As the reader is already fully acquainted with the adventures of our two heroes, it is unnecessary to repeat Audley's conversation here, as little of importance remains to be told. The excitements attendant upon the discovery of Ruth's father brought on a fresh access of fever, which retarded their movements very materially, and, together with the many interruptions to travel, delayed their return to South Ambury so much, that the news of George's death had ample time to precede his arrival. He had not been able to dispatch a courier with news of Audley, for it was all over with the Confederacy by that time, and the conquerors were taking possession of the country in every direction. Fortunately, Schuyler's commanding officer had been ordered to make his headquarters at South Ambury, and the two young Confederates, after formally surrendering themselves as prisoners of war, were permitted to return home under the escort of their Yankee friend. Schuyler was a gentleman of the first water, and had behaved most nobly towards his rebel acquaintances ever since their first meeting. He kept them as guests at his quarters, and not only supplied Audley during his illness with all the luxuries of a well-stored commissariat, but resigned to the invalid his own tent, with the many comforts it contained, for he was a man of large fortune, and could afford to make his soldier's fare a tolerably luxurious one. In return for these courtesies, George had invited Schuyler to be his guest during the time that his regiment was quartered in South Ambury, and obtained his colonel's consent to the arrangement. He also carried home with him the negro Grigg, whose ministrations had become indispensable to Audley, and the young woman Nan Hackett, for whose forlorn condition he felt himself responsible in having permitted that "burglarious attack," as he styled it, on the hut. He felt that she had been deprived of her natural protectors, such as they were, by his means, and he could not rest satisfied till he had placed her under the care of his mother or his aunt, and seen that she was pro-

vided with the means of living honestly and virtuously. He knew nothing about the little gunpowder-plot that Schuyler's men had frustrated so seasonably, and if he had it would have made no change in George's generous intentions.

The country being very much disturbed just at that time, Schuyler had kindly offered to station guards of his own men, under officers for whose character as gentlemen he could vouch, over the premises of any of his friends for whom George might desire such protection,—a circumstance which will account for the group of Federal officers Julia had seen on the piazza. As the White House lay first along their route, they had halted there, intending to leave a guard and proceed to Sandowne afterwards, but finding both families assembled at the mansion, there was no need to go farther that day, especially as the invalid was much in need of rest. They had arrived just as the family party assembled at Mr. Harfleur's table had finished their dinner, and while Julia was hiding among the shrubbery, so that the first intimation she received of the joyous event was from George's sudden appearance in the garden. George, after greeting his family, had taken the first opportunity to withdraw from the house, for the express purpose of avoiding Julia, who he expected would appear immediately to embrace her brother. How far he accomplished his object has been seen.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MR. GEORGE BRUEN OBJECTS TO TURNING A SOMERSAULT.

AUDLEY MALVERN was naturally very impatient to have a private interview with Ruth, but the desired opportunity did not occur till late in the evening.

The family were assembled on the front piazza, that universal place of summer evening resort to Southern households, when Audley, having taken some much-needed rest in his own room, joined the now by no means diminutive circle that made up the social life of the White House. He had felt a little uncomfortable at the idea of meeting Claude, but found her playing the deuce with Schuyler to such a degree that he immediately discarded all anxiety on his own account, and concluded that a certain little episode, in which he himself had not cut a very creditable figure, had left no damaging effects upon her heart. After exchanging, for the sake of courtesy, a few words, which they were both glad to be done with, he contrived to slip away with Ruth to the little side-entrance on the west, where he had first declared his love, and where they could now talk together unobserved. It was that part of the piazza which was so shaded by luxuriant creepers, and the entrance to the arbor where Ruth had first succeeded in propitiating her wayward brother opened at the foot of the steps where the lovers were seated. All this wonderful net-work of vines was now covered with a drapery of glorious blossoms, that loaded the air with perfume, and it seemed to Audley, as he watched Ruth pluck a spray of yellow jessamine and pin it in her hair, that this land, which he had once thought so dreary, was nothing less than Paradise, and that one of its houris stood before him.

Ruth took her seat on the uppermost step, and Audley, placing himself at her feet, sat meditating for some time as to how he should begin what he had to say. At last, raising his eyes to her face with a look full of meaning, he asked,—

"What would you do, Ruth, if your situation and Claude's were suddenly reversed? if you were the proud heiress and she the nameless outcast?"

"That is a very useless speculation, Audley," answered Ruth, turning away, as though pained by the reference to her own condition.

"No; but by heaven it is not useless!" cried Audley, taking both her hands and drawing her gently round, so as to look him full in the face. "Tell me, Ruth, what would you do?"

"I don't know; what you say is so unlikely, I have never thought about it; but I suppose my first duty would be to provide for Claude, and soften the change to her as much as possible; and then I would be very glad to think you would not have to marry so much beneath you in taking me for your wife."

Audley smiled with peculiar meaning.

"The tables are turned now, Ruth," he said, "so that I am not such a self-sacrificing saint, after all, in condescending to marry you. My supposition was not a mere idle speculation: you are the legitimate inheritor of a name as honorable as my own; and of a fortune in comparison with which all that I ever possessed is but

a trifle. Ruth, I have seen your father, and have solved the mystery of your life."

He then related to her, as accurately as he could, the history of Mortimer Seabury, from his first interview with him beside the stream down to the moment when they laid him to rest under the spreading live-oak that was to be his monument until his remains could be gathered up and placed beside his wife.

Ruth listened with breathless attention, and when Audley repeated that part of Seabury's story relating to the adventure in the church-yard, and the terrible events on the day of the tournament, he felt her hand tremble so violently in his own that he paused a moment, half frightened at the effect of his revelation. There was something that made her shudder in the thought that this man, whom she had regarded with fear and suspicion, was her father; and it was not till long afterwards, when she beheld, at his house in London, a portrait of Seabury as her mother had known him, and traced in his handsome features the veritable lineaments of the vagabond outlaw, that she quite overcame the impression.

Towards Mr. Harfleur her feeling was one of intense horror, mingled with compassion for the new victims of his crime. She would willingly have saved Claude and Bruen from the shame the discovery of their father's baseness would bring upon them, even to the point of sparing Mr. Harfleur, could she have done so with justice to her own parents. Audley, who felt that his own conduct towards Claude had not been quite free from blame, gladly acquiesced in all Ruth's plans for softening the blow to her sister, and entirely approved of her suggestion that her grandfather's estate should be divided between Claude and Bruen, though the proviso in the old gentleman's will, bequeathing it to Nettie's legitimate children, would now make her sole heiress, if she chose to assert her claim. Audley could not help admiring the spirit of generosity and forbearance she exhibited, as they talked over her altered prospects, and considered what course it would be best to pursue in the assertion of her rights, as to the obtaining of which there was not now the shadow of a doubt, with all the evidence they had at hand.

The conversation of the lovers was not entirely devoted to this subject, however, as may readily be imagined, and there is no telling how much it would have been prolonged, with its little digressions, if the falling dew had not reminded Ruth that her lover was still an invalid, and caused her to insist with tender anxiety upon retiring within-doors. Audley, who was quite ready to accept all the petting and spoiling his situation gave room for, and a good deal more besides, lingered awhile, just to enjoy the luxury of beholding her solicitude, then slowly rose and made his way into the house, leaning upon her arm.

As soon as they had disappeared, a stealthy figure glided from the cavernous arbor just beyond the piazza-steps, and, creeping to the foot of the railing, stood gazing with fierce, wild eyes towards an open window through which the forms of the two lovers were distinctly visible, as they lingered over their "good-night" in the cabinet behind the drawing-room. At the same moment another dark form emerged from the shrubbery that had overgrown the garden in every direction, and moved rapidly towards the house. It halted suddenly on perceiving some one at the foot of the steps, and shrunk back into the shadow of a great myrtle-bush that stood near, but in reaching this shelter it passed through a gleam of light from the cabinet window, that revealed the stern features of Julian Harfleur, distorted now by the workings of some fierce passion within his soul. Had he overheard Audley's conversation with Ruth? or had he, with the ready instinct of crime, scented his danger from the vague rumors already set afloat by Schuyler's men concerning the outlaw chief and his captured band? No one will ever know. A guilty conscience is quick to take alarm, and Mr. Harfleur felt the toils closing around him at last; the web he himself had woven, at what cost heaven only knows, had caught him in its folds; exposure and disgrace were staring him in the face, and Mr. Harfleur's pride could not endure exposure, though it had not shrunk from crime. Nothing short of outright murder could save him now, and Julian Harfleur's villany was of too refined a type for that. It was not the morality of the thing that repulsed him, but the brutality. He would murder by intrigue without a qualm,—in fact, he had been plotting half his life to destroy the lives of others, but there was a coarseness about direct bloodshed that revolted his intellectual nature. He did not lack boldness or nerve, but his wickedness was of too refined and intellectual a type for Thuggism, and he would have shrunk as sensitively as a tender-hearted woman from actually im-

bruing his hands in the blood of another. But his heart was full of murder, and at the very moment when Ruth and her lover were generously resolving to screen him as far as justice would permit from the consequences of his crime, he was secretly cursing his stars that they were not both of them consigned to the bottomless pit. If either were out of the way, there might be some chance of safety, and it seemed to him a cruel mockery of fate that had laid low at last the enemy he had dreaded so long, only to raise up in his place an avenging Nemesis in the person of Audley Malvern.

But though, of all persons living, Audley Malvern was perhaps the one most dangerous to Mr. Harfleur, in the knowledge he possessed and in his motives for using that knowledge, it was against Ruth that the bad man's malignant passions were most deeply stirred. She had been an object of secret terror to him so long that he had come to regard her as the evil genius of his life. She had eluded his schemes for her destruction so often, that the mere act of living seemed in her a willful defiance of his rights. He had brought himself to look upon her very existence as a wrong against himself, and he hated her for it. If anything could have tempted him to the actual execution of a deed that he had never shrunk from contriving, it was his hatred for the daughter of a man whom his malice pursued even beyond the grave, and this night he felt his hand almost ready to do the work his head had so often planned in vain. If she were fairly out of the way Malvern would have less motive for disclosing what he knew, and Claude might become to him a motive for silence.

It was in the midst of these reflections that his attention was attracted by the figure of a woman standing at the foot of the stair-railing, a few paces in front of him. So absorbed was she in watching the proceedings of the lovers through the open window, that she had not heard the sound of Mr. Harfleur's foot-fall, and was all unconscious of a gleam of lamp-light from the house, that fell full upon her face and betrayed its passionate workings. Mr. Harfleur recognized at a glance the young woman who had accompanied George's party; and something in her aspect seemed to strike him all at once with peculiar significance. A sinister smile overspread his dark features, and, drawing near on tip-toe, he stood watching her intently.

She never once withdrew her eyes from the window, and at times a wild, maniacal light would dart from them as something transpired within to rouse into fiercer fury the passion that was tearing her bosom. She held, half concealed in the folds of her dress, a large pruning-knife that she had picked up somewhere in the garden, and once, when Audley was seen to pass his fingers caressingly through Ruth's shining hair, she made a sudden lunge with her weapon in the dark, as if testing its strength on some imaginary victim, then turning her eyes for the first time from the window, she scanned the blade with awful significance.

Julian Harfleur's lips parted in a deadly smile. He had no difficulty in reading the little pantomime so unconsciously acting before him. Love, jealousy, madness,—here were instruments for working his will, if only an opportunity could be made for them to work in time. He stood a moment, with his hand pressed to his forehead in deep cogitation, then hurried away, silently as he had come, leaving Nan Hackett undisturbed in the contemplation of a scene which he knew was better calculated than anything he could say to rouse to frenzy the incipient madness he saw gleaming in her eyes.

Mr. Harfleur went immediately from the garden to the apartment of his quadroon housekeeper, the magnificent "Cleopatra" of irreverent gossips, and began to inquire, with unusual solicitude, into her arrangements for the accommodation of his guests, of whom there were enough to stretch to their utmost capacity even the liberal dimensions of old Randolph Bruen's hospitable mansion.

With secret satisfaction he learned that all had been provided for except Nan Hackett, who remained, a most unmanageable elephant, on the hands of the troubled housekeeper.

"You see, Mass' Julian," she said, in concluding the recital of her difficulties, "them poor white trash thinks theirselves too good to go with niggers, and they ain't fitten to be put with white folks, and every room in the house is full, so I just don't know what to do with her."

"Can't you make a bed for her in one of your young mistresses' rooms?" suggested Mr. Harfleur. "They wouldn't mind it for one night, and something must be done with the girl."

"Miss Claude is going to take Mrs. Malvern in with her," returned Cleopatra. "Them real gentlefolks always seems to

know, of their own accord, what other folks would like 'em to do; so, without anybody saying a word to her, Mrs. Malvern comes to me, and she says she knowed we was crowded, and offered to give up her room to the strangers, and sleep with one o' the young ladies; and as Miss Claude has the best room in the house, I got her to take her in there, so there ain't no room for poor white trash in there."

"And your Miss Ruth?"

"She'll stay in the little room at the end of the gallery. There ain't but one bed in that room; but the old sofa that you sent out of the parlor when the new furniture was brought is stowed away there."

"Very well; put some bedding on it and dispose of the girl there. I'll speak to your Miss Ruth about it myself; she'll not mind it for a single night, especially as the young woman seems to be a *protégée* of her friend Major Dalton."

Having completed this extremely satisfactory arrangement, Mr. Harfleur put on his blandest smile and returned to his guests. His face was beaming as he entered the parlor, for he was thinking to himself, "The room over the gallery is detached from the rest of the house, and nobody would be likely to hear a cry from there."

It was late that night before any one at the White House thought of going to bed. Julia went up-stairs first, accompanied by Ruth, to see that all Mrs. Malvern's effects had been transferred from the apartment she had surrendered to Claude's; and, having completed their inspection, were about retiring to their respective quarters when they were startled by a most extraordinary scuffling and lumbering in the room opposite, as though heavy furniture were being pushed about; and old Mr. Bruen's voice was heard storming vociferously in the midst of it all. Hastening to learn the cause of the disturbance, Ruth found her uncle, hot and red with excitement, making clamorous protestations in reply to his wife's efforts to quiet him.

"I don't want to turn a somersault, Margaret! by gad, I won't be made to turn a somersault! I'll go back to Sandowne first."

For a moment Ruth thought the old gentleman must have taken too much toddy.

"What are you talking about, uncle?" she said. "Nobody wants you to do anything of that sort."

"Look there! just look at that bed!" bawled Mr. Bruen, pointing to an elegant bedstead of black walnut; "do you think I want to be turned upside-down in my sleep like that? D—n my soul!—may the Lord forgive me, Ruth! I didn't mean to say it; but I won't be turned upside-down."

Ruth looked at the bed and could see nothing amiss; on the contrary, it appeared most invitingly soft and clean,—and she told her uncle so.

"You're a fool!" blurted the old gentleman, impatiently, interrupting her housewifely inspection of the sheets and pillows. "Don't you see that it sits east and west; and the mosquito-bar is fastened to the ceiling, so that I can't move it without letting the d—d things —no, Margaret; I didn't go to say it—eat me up?"

As Ruth looked more mystified than ever, Mrs. Bruen ventured an explanation.

"It is some notion your uncle has, my dear," she began, "about the rotation of the earth——"

"A notion! you call it a notion!" broke in Mr. Bruen, interrupting her. "Why, it's a scientific fact; anybody can see that who will take the trouble to think a minute. The earth turns on its axis from west to east; and it is plain as a weather-cock on a church-steeple that if your bed stands east and west, the rotation of the earth during the night carries you over from head to foot and causes you to turn a somersault; while, if you lie north and south, you are merely turned gently over from side to side, which any fool can see is much more wholesome and much better for the liver than to be tumbling head-over-heels all night,—to say nothing of magnetic currents, and their influence on the brain and the circulation of the blood. Everybody," he continued, warming with his pet theme, "ought to lie with their heads to the north, the centre of magnetic influence, so that its action will not be contrary to the movements of the brain. Half the restlessness and bad dreams that people are troubled with come from inattention to this simple hygienic principle. Why, God bless my soul! I couldn't sleep a wink with magnetic currents running contrary to the circulation of my blood, disordering my heart and liver, and my heels flying over my head all night like a tumbler in a circus. No, by Jupiter! may the Lord forgive me, Margaret! but I won't be forced to spend the night turning somersaults; I'll go to Sandowne first."

"Well, uncle," said Ruth, with difficulty concealing her amusement at this new piece of quackery the old gentleman had got into his head, "I think we can settle the difficulty without resorting to such extreme measures. In the room I am to occupy the head of the bed is towards the north, you and aunt can occupy that; and although a somersault is not a very ladylike proceeding, still, as there will be no one to witness my performance of it, I can sleep very comfortably in here."

The old gentleman scented the laughter lurking in her words, and felt his dignity offended. He gave her a lecture for her imprudence and want of common sense, scolded her for the unreasonableness of young people in general, till at last, having fairly talked himself out, he was hustled off by his wife and put to bed, let us hope, without more ado.

Scarcely was he out of sight when "Cleopatra" made her appearance, and asked, with some trepidation,—

"What is to be done with the young woman, Miss Ruth? Mr. Harfleur said she was to sleep on the sofa in that room you have given up; but she can't stay in there now with Mr. and Mrs. Bruen, and there ain't but one bed in here, where you're going to sleep, and the room is too small for anything else. Them poor white trash is always in the way, anyhow."

The difficulty was solved by Julia, who, from Claude's room across the corridor, had overheard all that transpired.

"Put the poor girl in my room," she said, coming to the door and addressing the distracted housekeeper. "There is ample space for another bed, and I don't mind having her at all; in fact, as I am to sleep down-stairs in the isolated left wing, I would rather have some one in my room than not."

Cleopatra, glad to have this troublesome elephant off her hands at last, conducted Nan immediately to Miss Malvern's apartment. As she was unaware of the secret motive for Mr. Harfleur's solicitude on her account, she did not, of course, think it necessary to inform him of the slight change that had been made relative to the disposal of so insignificant a person.

Long after everybody else had gone to bed, George Dalton and Audley Malvern sat talking together. Somehow George felt more restless and dissatisfied with himself that night than he had ever done before. He could not sleep, and, to escape from the burden of his own thoughts, had gone over to Audley's room in the hope of distracting his mind by talking over the affairs of his friend.

"Have you exploded your mine yet?" he asked, seating himself on the edge of Audley's bed.

"No; I have only told Ruth," replied Audley. "I intend to lay the whole matter before your uncle, and consult with him before taking any decided steps. For the sake of her brother and sister, Ruth wishes to be as merciful to Harfleur as is compatible with justice to the dead."

"Not very tender mercy he'll get even at that," said George.

"The dog Tadpole can easily be induced to turn State's evidence, don't you think so?" asked Audley.

"Yes; he'll turn anything to save his precious skin; but when are you going to begin, Audley? I want to see your business dispatched as quickly as possible. Life is insupportable to me now without desperate excitements, and I've a notion of going to join Maximilian in Mexico—hush! what's that?"

Both young men started to their feet at the same instant. A succession of smothered screams seemed to proceed from the opposite wing of the mansion, but the cries were so confused and broken by intervening walls, that it was impossible to tell what they meant. Audley grasped his cane and limped after George, who threw open a window to listen. Audley's room was on the lower floor, overlooking the garden, across which the sound was borne more distinctly. There was a confused noise of women's voices shrieking wildly, then a cry of distress, drowned by demoniac yells that mingled with it.

"Good God, that's Julia's voice!" cried Audley, turning pale, as the cry reached him; "in the name of heaven, George—" But before the words were out of his mouth George had vaulted through the open window and was out of sight.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A WEDDING OR A FUNERAL?

When Julia Malvern retired to her own apartment she found Nan Hackett in quiet possession of the lodging assigned her. There was no light in the room

except what the moonbeams, struggling through vine-shadowed windows, afforded; but Julia guessed, from the slow, measured breathing that proceeded from the corner where Nan's bed was made, that her strange companion was already asleep. She was glad of this, for she longed to be alone. She did not light her lamp; the moonshine was bright enough for her to grope her way about the room by it, and Julia shunned the light because her soul was dark. She almost sighed as she put off the black dress she was to wear no more; it seemed such a mockery to lay aside the garb of mourning when her heart was shrouded in blackness forever. True, Audley was restored to her,—she felt thankful for that; but George, though reprieved from the grave, was lost to her forever, and his anger was more cruel than death. She was thankful that he had been spared, though his words left her little reason to hope that it was for a better life, or that the work of ruin which her hand had commenced would ever be undone, and she must bear the burden of it through all eternity. Yet even this—may heaven forgive her the thought!—she felt was less intolerable than to bear his hatred and contempt,—to live under the ban of everlasting separation that he had pronounced between them. He had repelled her, turned from her in hatred, and that when she had humbled herself in the dust before him. Proud as her nature was, she did not regret the humiliation; he might trample on her pride if he chose, but her heart was breaking under his coldness, and she felt, now she had lost it forever, that without his love heaven itself would be a hell to her.

She knew that her thoughts were wicked, and she struggled hard against them. With her long flaxen hair streaming over her shoulders, and her hands pressed tightly on her forehead, she sat alone in the darkness, wrestling with an anguish that seemed too heavy to be borne; till at last, by a sudden impulse, she slid from her chair and dropped upon her knees before the open window. Could it be that heaven, knowing how near to eternity she would be before that night passed away, had inspired her with the holy thought?

Julia had never been used to pray,—it might have been better for her peace of mind if she had,—and even now I cannot answer for the orthodoxy of her appeal. Her petitions to high heaven went up mingled with many a poor human longing, sullied perchance with vain regrets and passionate yearnings for the idol that had failed her; but she prayed the best she knew how, with sincerity and openness of heart, and let us trust that heaven in its mercy had pity on the human frailties of a soul struggling in the bonds of human misery, for she rose from her knees refreshed in spirit, and laid herself down upon her bed with a calmness and quietness she had not known for months.

She sank at last into the troubled, unrefreshing slumber of one "sleeping for sorrow," and had lain unconscious for an hour or more, when she was suddenly roused by a sound as of some one creeping steathily about the room. Upon the first indication of her being awake, all movement instantly ceased; and, as Julia was not a nervous or timid person, she concluded, after listening attentively awhile and hearing nothing, that she had been mistaken, and was about to close her eyes and seek oblivion again in sleep, when it occurred to her all at once that the room was unaccountably hot and stifling, and she observed for the first time that the windows which she had left open to admit the cool night air were all closed tight and the shutters drawn to. She wondered if her companion had waked during the night and had her fears excited by any noise outside. She called her name gently two or three times, but received no answer. The thought then suggested itself to her mind that Nan might be a somnambulist, and, going to the girl's bed to see if she were there, she found it vacant. Feeling uneasy on Nan's account, she groped her way to the door, but found it locked and the key gone; and, as she rattled the latch in her fruitless effort to move the bolt, a peal of wild, demoniac laughter sounded close to her ear. Seriously alarmed, she rushed towards the bell-rope, but only to find it tied up out of her reach. A dash at the nearest window proved equally vain; it was tightly closed; and, while she was struggling helplessly to raise the heavy sash, she felt herself suddenly seized by the hair, and saw by the dim moonlight that struggled in through the crevices of the blinds the gleam of a long murderous knife brandished over her head. With a sudden bound she freed herself from the maniac's grasp, but there was no chance of escape from the room. She made a dash at each window as she passed, but only to find them all securely fastened; and, even if she had had the strength, she could not have taken the time to burst them open, for the yelling fury was close

at her heels, brandishing her weapon in the air, and shrieking like a demon. Round and round the room they sped in the frantic race of life and death, leaping over chairs and tables in the dark, upsetting everything that stood in their way,—one wildly crying for help, the other madly shrieking out her insane vengeance,—hurling against her victim's head, or dashing furiously to the ground, every movable thing she could lay her hands upon.

Chased from corner to corner, bruised and bleeding with injuries she had received from missiles hurled by her frantic assailant, or from obstacles she had rushed against in the dark, feeling the fierce lunatic gaining so fast upon her steps that she hacked the streaming hair and garments of her victim with her weapon, Julia at last gave up the useless struggle, and, raising her arms above her head in a gesture of hopeless entreaty, she sank down exhausted before the window she had vainly tried to open. At the same instant the shutters were burst open from without, letting in a stream of moonlight on her face, and Nan Hackett then, for the first time, discerned the features of her victim.

It was not the face she expected to see, for Mr. Harfleur had taken pains to have her informed that she was to pass the night in Ruth's apartment, and no one had thought it worth while to inform her of the change. She wavered an instant, the picture of a baffled Erinnys, then, with a wild yell of rage and disappointment, rushed forward and plunged her knife into Julia's breast, just as George Dalton, with one blow from his powerful arm, shivered the window-sash to atoms and sprang into the room. He drew the weapon from Julia's breast and pressed his hand frantically over the bleeding wound. Julia raised her eyes an instant and saw that she was in George Dalton's arms; she fixed upon him a look of passionate fondness that would have melted a heart of stone; then a glassy stare came over her features and sealed them with the image of death.

Oh, George, it is all in vain now that you answer that mute appeal with passionate kisses and words of burning love; those lips are insensible to your kisses, and the love which, an hour ago, she would have given her heart's blood to regain, now that the price is paid and it is won, moves her no more than if she were stone. Too late, George, come your forgiveness and your embraces; and it seems like a cruel mockery to lavish upon senseless clay the tenderness the living heart yearned for in vain. Too late, all too late! The burden of how many a soul's despair is written in those words!

So George thought as he raised the lifeless form in his arms and laid it on the bed. All the household had been alarmed by this time, and came hurrying to the scene of the tragedy. Poor Mrs. Malvern, whose joy had been so suddenly changed into mourning, was almost beside herself with grief, and the utmost consternation prevailed everywhere as soon as the dreadful truth was known. George was the only person who seemed to remain perfectly calm and unmoved amid the general commotion. He sat by the bed with Julia's head pillowed on his arm and his eyes riveted upon the pale, rigid features, as though fixed by a spell that no power could break. His lips were pressed firmly together; not a groan nor a sigh escaped him; he spoke to no one, he heeded no one; he was conscious of nothing but the cold, immovable face before him.

But, though he betrayed no sign of emotion, those who knew him best knew only too well what that awful calmness meant. No one addressed him; no one dared to intrude upon his grief; for, though he and Julia had seemed so widely sundered in life, yet, somehow, all felt instinctively that he had the best right to be at her side now. Mrs. Malvern herself did not attempt to displace him, and Audley, though frantic with grief at the loss of a sister whom he all but idolized, respected George's title to the miserable pre-eminence in sorrow.

Only once did George indulge in any outward expression of his feelings. Audley was leaning over the bed gazing at his sister's face, and the sight so overcame him that he staggered and almost fell upon the body. George put out his hand to sustain him, and, raising his eyes an instant to his friend's face, said, in a voice that quivered with anguish,—

"Oh, Audley, you were never cruel to her as I have been!" And he fell to kissing the pale, motionless lips, as though he would warm them back into life with the ardor of his love. Did he think, then, of the words of passionate entreaty those rigid lips had addressed to him so fruitlessly a few hours ago? Did he remember how she had knelt at his feet, and the cruel repulse she had met at his hand? Whatever his thoughts were about,

they must have been bitter enough, heaven knows; for there was nothing in all the past relations between Julia and himself that could have suggested a consoling reflection at such a time.

Among the officers who had accompanied Schuyler was, fortunately, the surgeon attached to his regiment, to whose services Audley was in a great measure indebted for his present convalescence. This person was immediately summoned to Julia's bedside, not with the hope that he could do any good, but from that blind dependence which people place in the judgment of medical men at such times, they hardly know why.

The physician approached the couch on which Julia lay, and quietly felt her pulse. Mrs. Malvern watched him eagerly, and something in his face made her start with a wild, undefined hope as his fingers touched the cold, nerveless hand. He held it for some moments without speaking, then placed his hand over her heart and waited anxiously for some sign of its beating. When he had finished his examination he beckoned Ruth to him.

"Bring stimulants, quick," he whispered, and Ruth disappeared.

Mrs. Malvern had overheard.

"Doctor," she gasped, "is there any hope?"

"Life is not yet extinct," replied the physician, evasively.

"And can she recover,—is there any possibility, any hope?" cried the distracted mother, grasping his arm.

"The wound in itself is not dangerous," he answered. "The weapon, an old garden pruning-knife, was too dull to reach a vital part; but the mental shock—that is what we have to fear: the symptoms all point to the brain as the seat of danger."

Mrs. Malvern trembled, but she was a woman of strong heart, and determined to know the worst.

"You fear, then, that reason may not return with life," she said, in a voice tremulous with anguish.

"The chances for life itself are so desperate that we need not think of anything else now," replied the physician, not daring either to deny or to confirm her fears; and Ruth returning at that instant with the necessary restoratives, he evaded further questions in setting about the well-nigh hopeless task of bringing Julia back to consciousness. While the others rubbed her hands and feet with stimulants, wetting her lips, from time to time, with wine, he carefully dressed the wound in her breast, and stanched the flow of blood she could ill afford to lose. Gradually, her pulse grew stronger, her limbs relaxed, and the color came back to her lips, but she showed no signs of returning consciousness. All night long they watched and worked; she breathed, she lived,—but that was all. About daybreak, by order of the physician, she was carried into another chamber, that if she should revive, the horrors of the past night might not be too vividly recalled. The motion seemed to have a salutary effect, for soon after they laid her down again she moved one arm slightly, and was seen to turn her head towards the light. It was a moment of awful suspense. They all stood back in breathless expectation, fearing almost as much as they longed for the moment when she would open her eyes.

Their suspense was soon ended; she drew one long, feeble breath, and then the fringy lashes slowly parted. Mrs. Malvern beckoned to George; he bent over the couch and called her name,—

"Julia."

No answer,—only a wild, vacant stare, and George reeled backwards, covering his face with his hands, unable to endure the sight.

"Doctor, this is worse than death," gasped Audley, staggering to the bedside and looking disconsolately into his sister's altered face.

The physician made no reply; what could he say in the presence of such affliction?

By night, a violent fever had set in, and the air of vacant immobility had given place to wild rolling of the eyes, accompanied with delirious ravings. The physician pronounced it a very aggravated case of brain fever, which, though almost inevitably fatal, yet left this one forlorn hope, that if she should survive, reason might return when the disease left the brain.

For three weeks the dreadful delirium continued, George never leaving her bedside, except for a little necessary repose. In her incoherent ravings, he caught many a random word that pierced like an arrow to his heart. She was constantly calling his name, and imploring him to come to her, but showed no sign of recognition when he spoke to her, nor gave any heed to his tenderest caresses.

At last, on the twenty-first day, the fever began to abate, and towards evening Julia sank into a heavy, deathlike stupor. Then the doctor said the crisis

had come. She might wake out of that stupor with reason restored, but the danger was that it would be only a brief gleam of light, as she must sink into a state of almost hopeless exhaustion when the fever left her. Four anxious watchers — Mrs. Malvern, Audley, Ruth, and George — sat by the bed all that night and all next day, waiting in awful suspense for the moment of waking, if, indeed, that moment was ever to come.

About four o'clock in the afternoon her breathing had become almost imperceptible, and it seemed as if she had already passed away. Mrs. Malvern rose, leaned over the bed, and placed her hand on the thin, colorless lips, to see if life had really become extinct, when, all at once, Julia slowly opened her eyes and looked into her mother's face with a smile of loving recognition.

If Mrs. Malvern had not been a person of remarkable self-control the sudden joy would have been too much for her, but she was one who never lost her presence of mind. Motioning George to keep out of view, lest the sight of him should prove too agitating for the invalid in her exhausted state, she sat down quietly on the side of the bed and took Julia's hands in her own. Julia was the first to speak, and her words showed that her thoughts were fixed upon eternity.

"Is the bishop here?" she asked, in a voice so feeble that Mrs. Malvern had to put her ear close to Julia's lips to catch the sound.

"He shall be here directly, my child, if you wish it," said her mother. "He has remained at Sandowne on your account ever since you have been sick, and shall be sent for."

"He cannot come too soon," said Julia. And a messenger was dispatched immediately for the holy man.

Mrs. Malvern was glad her daughter had made an opening to introduce the painful subject on which, as a Christian woman, she felt it her duty to speak to her.

"My child," she said, after a little pause, "your condition is a very desperate one; do you feel willing to die?"

"Life has nothing to offer me, mother, that I should desire to cling to it," she answered, sadly.

There was silence a moment, and then she called her brother's name. Audley stooped down and kissed her.

"And where is Ruth?" she asked. "I must see her, too, before I go."

Audley put his arm around Ruth and drew her to the bedside. "Isn't there some one else you would like to see, Julia?" he whispered, bending over her.

"No, it's no use," she answered, mournfully, for she knew very well whom he meant. "Nothing can move him, not even my death."

Audley made no reply, but beckoned to George, who was standing at the head of the bed, to come forward. George threw himself on his knees beside her couch, and, taking Julia's wasted hands in his own, buried his face in them, unable to speak. There was no need of words, those two hearts understood each other at last without the aid of language. With a great effort Julia disengaged one of her hands from George's grasp, and laid it tenderly on his head, while she softly whispered his name. It was enough. George knew then, as he might have known before he knelt there, that his pardon was sealed.

"Oh, Julia!" he cried, his heart wrung at the memory of his former obduracy, "can you forgive so easily, when I was so hard, so cruel?"

"We have both been cruel, George," she answered; "cruel to ourselves and to each other, but we will make the future atone for the past. I am not going to die yet, you see, after all," she continued, turning to her mother with a quiet smile; "there is too much to live for now;" and she fixed her eyes upon George with a look full of happiness and love. It was almost incredible how that one moment had altered her.

George leaned over and whispered something in her ear.

"Yes," she answered, with a smile; "let it be so; we cannot begin our new life too soon."

"Audley," said George, turning to his friend, "Julia and I want to be married when the bishop comes; make ready for the wedding."

It was no time for questioning any wish of Julia's, and the necessary preparations were quickly made. The bishop arrived about dusk, and was conducted immediately to Julia's chamber, whither George's mother, together with his aunt and uncle, had been summoned to witness the solemn nuptials. There, under the very shadow of the destroying angel's wing, those two, who had learned their lesson of life through such stormy trials, were united in peace at last, never to be sundered again, as they mutually vowed, "till death did them part." The words seemed awfully solemn, and one of them

so near the grave; but heaven had decreed that the parting was not to be yet.

As soon as the marriage was over, George placed his wife's head on his arm and drew her close to his breast. Pillowed so tranquilly, with the eyes whose light made all the sunshine of her life resting upon her, Julia soon fell into a soft, refreshing slumber, nature's own sweet restorer, and from that hour she began to mend. Her convalescence was slow and tedious, but the day came at last when she was able to leave her own room. It was on Ruth's wedding-day that she first made her appearance in the parlor at the White House, leaning on her husband's arm, the proudest and happiest bride of the two.

CHAPTER XLIX.

EVERYBODY GETS MARRIED, AND LIVES HAPPY FOREVER AFTER.

Little more remains to be told in bringing this narrative to a close. Audley found no difficulty in making good all his wife's claims, for, besides the evidence furnished by Seabury's dying revelations, a few significant threats from that redoubtable official, Judge Lynch, soon convinced Mr. Æneas Tadpole that it was the duty of a minister of the gospel to espouse the cause of truth and honesty, since there was nothing further to be gained by fraud and deceit. He accordingly determined, with commendable prudence, to save himself by turning State's evidence against the miserable author of the plot in which his worthy parent had been such an efficient accomplice; and as the excellent Nehemiah Tadpole had provided his son with all the evidence he possessed relating to the subject, for the laudable purpose of black-mailing Mr. Harfleur, if not in the interests of the gospel, at least for the benefit of one of its expounders, his revelations proved of considerable importance.

But if Æneas saved himself from the clutches of the law by betraying what he knew to the disadvantage of others, he did not escape some sad indignities to his sacred person. Though he had smoothed over his father's share in the conspiracy with much art, by representing that innocent saint as the dupe of Harfleur's wiles, and though no direct participation whatever could be proved against himself, yet the public indignation excited by the discovery of so diabolical a fraud was very sweeping, as popular sentiments always are, and embraced even the pious Æneas in its condemnation. His virtues had never been duly appreciated, anyway, by the benighted barbarians around South Ambury, who, it is to be feared, were rather glad of a good pretext for gratifying their ferocious and blood-thirsty instincts at his expense,—at least, this is the face Mr. Tadpole put upon it afterwards, when recounting his adventures to the sympathizing sisters of the flock that chose him for their shepherd on his return to his native city.

Be that as it may, however, on the night preceding the day which Mr. Tadpole had appointed for his rather hasty departure from South Ambury, a party of masked men rode up to the house where he had taken lodging,—a negro cabin on the outskirts of the town, where he got his accommodations cheap,—and clamorously demanded the person of Æneas Tadpole. Even the sacred character of a "minister of the gospel," which he pleaded so earnestly in his own behalf, was of no avail to shield him from the fury of these men of Belial, for they dragged the pious hero irreverently from under the old mauma's big wash-tub, where they found him concealed, and, stripping off his suit of respectable clerical black, proceeded to clothe him with that peculiarly Southern invention, a coat of tar and feathers; after which, being placed astride a fence-rail, he was borne in triumph, at the head of a torch-light procession, to the town-pump, and there ducked until his ministerial breath was nearly drowned out of his body. Schuyler was suspected of having connived at this bit of amateur Ku-Kluxism,—at any rate, the perpetrators were never called to account for their outrage upon an exemplary and loyal citizen. One such hint was sufficient to make Æneas shake the dust of South Ambury from his feet forever, and when last heard from he was the popular pastor of one of the largest and most influential churches in his native city of Boston, where he still derives great *éclat* from the martyrdom he once suffered at the hands of Southern barbarians.

There was some difficulty in clearing the mystery as to how Nettie's betrothal ring, which she would never on any ac-

count remove from her finger, fell into the hands of Mr. Harfleur, to be returned in the letter he had forged to Seabury; but this was finally solved by the confession of the woman Cleopatra, who acknowledged that she had stolen it, at Mr. Harfleur's instigation, while her young mistress was asleep; she being at that time a servant in Randolph Bruen's household.

And the chief actor in this dark drama of crime,—what had become of him, and what was he doing while his dark secrets were being unveiled? This is a question which no mortal tongue will ever answer. On the night of the dreadful catastrophe recorded in the last chapter he had seemed inclined to make light of the first alarm, and did not show any unusual alacrity in hastening to the fatal scene, but upon hearing that it was Miss Malvern who had been murdered he was observed to turn deadly pale, and muttered a dreadful imprecation. He entered Julia's room with the rest, who went crowding, pell-mell, during the first moments of confusion and horror, gazed at this last victim of his cunning, as she lay pale and motionless on the bed, then hurried away, stern and silent, as he had come. No one thought about him any more amid the horror and confusion of that night, and by morning he was gone, nobody could tell where. Upon subsequent inquiry, a servant declared that he had seen him, shortly after the alarm about Miss Malvern, go to a secretary where he was in the habit of keeping his private papers, secure a small package, and then walk out at the front door, but in what direction he had then proceeded the servant could not tell. This was the last certain trace of him that could ever be discovered. About three weeks afterwards a body was found floating in the Altamaha, bloated and disfigured beyond recognition, but supposed, by certain marks about the clothing, and by the beautiful regularity and whiteness of the teeth,—a feature for which Mr. Harfleur was remarkable,—to be the missing man. The identity, however, could never be established conclusively, and to this day it is not known whether the miserable victim of his own conspiracy sought refuge in voluntary death from the shame and confusion that were about to overwhelm him, or whether he went forth a nameless wanderer, to hide his burden of guilt and dishonor in some far-off land. Cold, selfish, secret to the last, did he sneak away, leaving his children to bear alone the heritage of shame he had left them, or did some faint gleam of a nobler nature break out in the sunset of his day, revealing to him a hope that it would be better for them were the temptation to vengeance upon him removed? For months he had felt the coils of his own guilty past slowly tightening round him. How he had struggled in secret to free himself from the meshes of one web of guilt by weaving another to entangle fresh victims the reader of these pages knows full well, but the time had come at last when fraud and deceit could avail him no longer. What his end was God alone can tell. No certain tidings of him ever reached his family, and perhaps it is as well that no hand should lift the veil from a life which charity would prompt us to hide in darkness forever.

Ruth generously bestowed upon her brother and sister the same fortunes that they would have inherited had their father's fraud never been detected. She did not avail herself of the clause in old Randolph Bruen's will, which would have made her sole heiress of her grandfather's boundless acres, as well as of the untold thousands of the India merchant. She contented herself with her father's wealth, which certainly ought to have been enough to gratify any reasonable degree of cupidity, and divided her mother's fortune, or rather its equivalent, for she reserved the family homestead to herself, between her brother and sister. Claude, not long afterwards, married Schuyler, and is now one of the reigning belles of the "republican court," where, as pedigrees are never inquired into very rigidly, she has never suffered any public humiliation on account of her own. Bruen accompanied his favorite sister when she went abroad, soon after her marriage, and was placed at a gymnastic institute in Paris, where his deformity, though not cured, was very much mitigated, and his temper improved in proportion. He afterwards went to Italy to prosecute his art-studies, and his pictures have already begun to attract the attention of connoisseurs in the great art-centres of Europe.

Nan Hackett remained a confirmed lunatic from the night of her attack upon Julia. She was placed in the State asylum and ample provision made for her maintenance, through the generosity of Mrs. George Dalton; but the most careful treatment never restored her to lucidity, even for the shortest interval. Her wild ravings gave no clue to the motive that had led to her first terrible outbreak, and

Audley was never made aware of the fatal passion he had so unwittingly inspired. He had been kind and courteous to Nan, and had expressed, by his manner, the sympathy that her misfortunes and forlorn condition naturally awakened in a noble and generous heart; but he little dreamed what a fatal impression a few acts of common courtesy would make upon a poor girl who had probably never heard a word of kindness before.

The reader, no doubt, feels some curiosity to know what became of our friend Major Maelstrom in the general winding up of affairs; and, truly, this veracious historian wishes there was a less melancholy fate to be recorded of him. Mrs. Norgood set upon him with redoubled efforts after his return from the wars, and the miserable man rushed blindly upon his fate. She tried at first to divert his attentions from Mary, who was already provided for, to one of her unmarried daughters, but when she saw that there was absolutely no chance for Victoria Regina or Estramadura Ida, she changed her tactics, like a prudent general, and conducted the campaign with such success, that, in six months after the close of his war with the bushwhackers, he surrendered at discretion to the Norgoods, and little Mary Dalton was fairly installed in his household as Mrs. Major Maelstrom. The unsuspecting victim was immediately set upon by such a swarm of kin-in-law as soon made him realize that matrimony was a much more complex institution than he had supposed; but, as the major's troubles made a happy diversion in favor of our other old friend, George Bruen, the reader can no doubt contemplate them with serenity.

Uncle Bruen behaved beautifully towards George upon his marriage with Julia. The circumstances of their union were so romantic, and the old gentleman had become so much attached to her, that he readily relinquished his own matrimonial projects for George. He did this the less reluctantly, since recent developments had made it desirable for Claude's own sake that her future home should be as far as possible from the scene of her father's crime and exposure; while as to George's living away from Sandowne, the old gentleman would sooner have endured that the foundations of the earth itself should be moved. He resigned Sandowne to the young couple at once, and retired to another of his plantations, which he persisted in regarding as more salubrious in the very teeth of a fearful siege of chills that all but shook him to pieces the only summer he ever spent there. After that he came to the conclusion that his liver was in an abnormal condition, and spent his summers at various resorts for invalids, in Virginia and North Carolina, dabbling in the water-cure system, till somebody fortunately put homœopathy into his head, which has been a never-failing resource to him ever since.

George and Julia spent the first two years of their married life traveling abroad with Audley and his wife. The ladies attracted much attention in the great social centres of Europe, where Julia's brilliant wit and Ruth's wonderful gift of song, together with the singular beauty of both, quite upset established traditions as to the inanity and inertness of Southern women.

But these brilliant experiences did not unfit them for the quiet life of their plantation homes. On the contrary, after wandering over half the globe, they turned with greater affection than ever to those sunny solitudes that bore for them the sacred name of home. Audley often laughs at his first impression of the "melancholy pines"; and as he sits enjoying his afternoon cigar on the airy piazza at the White House, with his children playing around him,—a pattern of middle-aged respectability,—he often declares that this is the only country worth living in after all.

A complete reformation took place in George Dalton after his marriage. There was not a more exemplary citizen in all the country; and George used to declare that he was becoming alarmed at his own respectability until there began to be a great talk about sending him to Congress, and then he said he was convinced that he could not be quite so respectable a personage after all as he had supposed himself. People who remembered him in his wild days marveled at the change; but when they saw him with his wife, and witnessed their unexampled devotion to each other, they ceased to find it strange that the influence of such a woman had wrought so powerfully upon his life. When his friends expressed their pleasure at his new career, George would laugh and declare that it was all due to his being so hen-pecked and ruled over by his wife; but the look that he turned upon her whenever she came into his presence showed that it was a rule of gentleness and love, to which George yielded only a too willing obedience.

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